

**George Soros:  
A Partnership with China  
to Avoid World War**

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**• UNIVERSITY PRESS ISSUE •**

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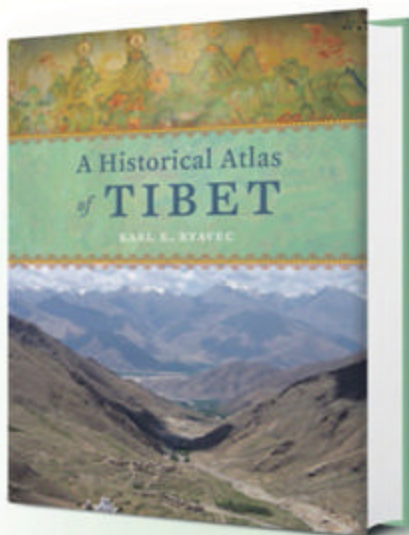


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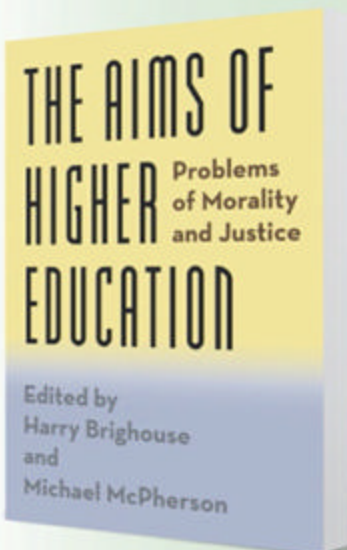
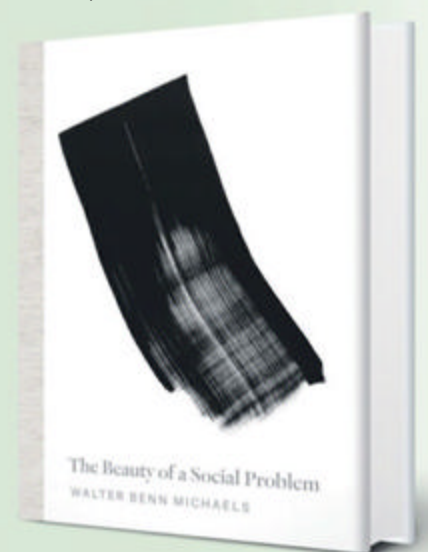
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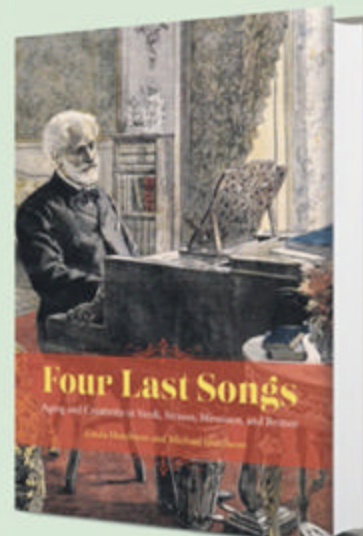
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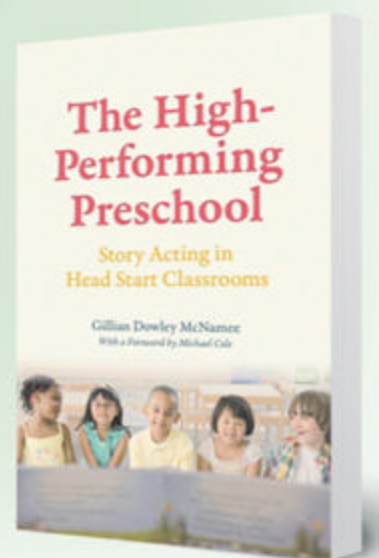
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# A Partnership with China to Avoid World War

George Soros

International cooperation is in decline both in the political and financial spheres. The UN has failed to address any of the major conflicts since the end of the cold war; the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference left a sour aftertaste; the World Trade Organization hasn't concluded a major trade round since 1994. The International Monetary Fund's legitimacy is increasingly questioned because of its outdated governance, and the G20, which emerged during the financial crisis of 2008 as a potentially powerful instrument of international cooperation, seems to have lost its way. In all areas, national, sectarian, business, and other special interests take precedence over the common interest. This trend has now reached a point where instead of a global order we have to speak of global disorder.

In the political sphere local conflicts fester and multiply. Taken individually these conflicts could possibly be solved but they tend to be interconnected and the losers in one conflict tend to become the spoilers in others. For instance, the Syrian crisis deteriorated when Putin's Russia and the Iranian government came to Bashar al-Assad's rescue, each for its own reasons. Saudi Arabia provided the seed money for ISIS and Iran instigated the Houthi rebellion in Yemen to retaliate against Saudi Arabia. Bibi Netanyahu tried to turn the US Congress against the nuclear treaty the US was negotiating with Iran. There are just too many conflicts for international public opinion to exert a positive influence.

In the financial sphere the Bretton Woods institutions—the IMF and the World Bank—have lost their monopoly position. Under Chinese leadership, a parallel set of institutions is emerging. Will they be in conflict or will they find a way to cooperate? Since the financial and the political spheres are also interconnected, the future course of history will greatly depend on how China tackles its economic transition from investment and export-led growth to greater dependence on domestic demand, and how the US reacts to it. A strategic partnership between the US and China could prevent the evolution of two power blocks that may be drawn into military conflict.

How did we reach this point of global disorder? During the cold war the world was dominated by two superpowers. Each maintained some degree of control over its allies and satellites, and avoided direct military confrontation with the other because of the danger of Mutually Assured Destruction. It was a MAD system but it worked: it produced a number of local military conflicts but it avoided a world war.

When the Soviet empire fell apart the United States had an opportunity to become the sole superpower and the guarantor of peace in the world, but it did not rise to the occasion. The US was founded on the principle of individual freedom and it was not predisposed to become the policeman of the world. Indeed, it did not have a coherent view of the meaning of leadership in international affairs. During the cold war it had a bipartisan foreign policy, on which

Democrats and Republicans largely agreed; but after the cold war ended the partnership broke up. Both parties continued to emphasize American sovereignty but they rarely agreed on subordinating it to international obligations.

Then in 1997, a group of neoconservatives argued that the US should use its military supremacy to impose its national interests, and established a think tank called the Project for the New American Century, "to promote American global leadership." But that was a false approach: military force cannot be used to rule the world. After the terrorist attack of September 11, the neocons persuaded President George W. Bush to attack Iraq on dubious grounds that

Consensus also allowed capital to escape taxation and regulation. That was a triumph for market fundamentalism.

Unfortunately, the scientific foundations of this approach proved to be ill conceived. Unregulated financial markets are inherently unstable: instead of a general equilibrium that assures the optimum allocation of resources, they produce financial crises. This was dramatically demonstrated by the crash of 2008. By coincidence, 2008 marked both the end of America's political supremacy and the demise of the Washington Consensus. It was also the beginning of a process of financial and political disintegration that first manifested itself in the microcosm of the



President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping, Beijing, November 2014

turned out to be false, and the US lost its supremacy. The Project for the New American Century had approximately the same lifespan as Hitler's Thousand-Year Reich: around ten years.

On the financial side, by contrast, there was a clear consensus—the so-called Washington Consensus—on America's role in the world. It became dominant in the 1980s under the leadership of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. It had strong ideological support from market fundamentalists; it had a supposedly scientific foundation in the Efficient Market Hypothesis and Rational Choice Theory; and it was efficiently administered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The consensus was a much more subtle compromise between international governance and national self-interest than the neocons' view that military power is supreme.

Indeed, the Washington Consensus had its roots in the original compromise on which the Bretton Woods institutions were founded. John Maynard Keynes proposed a truly international currency, the *bancor*, but the US insisted on the dollar as the world's reserve currency and it prevailed. In the memorable words of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." The Washington Consensus promoted free trade and the globalization of financial markets. In the late 1990s, market fundamentalists even tried to modify the articles of agreement of the IMF so as to impose capital account convertibility, the free exchange of currencies. That attempt failed, but by allowing financial capital to move around freely the Washington

European Union, but then spread to the world at large.

The crash of 2008 had a lasting negative effect on all the economies of the world, with the notable exception of China's. The Chinese banking system was relatively isolated from the rest of the world and largely government-owned. As a consequence, the Chinese banks could, at the government's behest, offset the collapse of external demand by flooding the economy with credit. The Chinese economy replaced the American consumer as the motor of the global economy, largely by selling to the American consumer on credit. It has been a rather weak motor, reflecting the relative size of the Chinese and American economies, so that the global economy has grown rather slowly since the emergence of China's international economic power.

The main reason why the world avoided a global depression is that economists have learned some lessons from the experience of the 1930s. The heavy load of debt and lingering political prejudices limited the scale of fiscal stimulus globally (again with the exception of China); but the Federal Reserve under the leadership of its chairman, Ben Bernanke, embarked on unorthodox monetary policies including quantitative easing—large-scale injection of money into the economy through the purchase of bonds by the Federal Reserve. This prevented the reduction in effective demand from deteriorating into a global depression.

The crash of 2008 was also indirectly responsible for the euro crisis. The euro

was an incomplete currency: it had a common central bank but it did not have a common treasury. The architects of the euro were aware of this defect but believed that when the deficiency became apparent the political will could be summoned to correct it. After all, that is how the European Union was brought into existence—taking one step at a time, knowing full well that it was insufficient but that when the need arose it would lead to further steps.

Unfortunately, political conditions changed between 1999, when the euro was adopted, and 2008, when the need arose. Germany under the leadership of Helmut Kohl led the process of European integration in order to facilitate the reunification of Germany. But reunification proved expensive and the German public became unwilling to take on any additional expenses. When, after the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008, the European finance ministers declared that no systemically important financial institution would be allowed to fail, Chancellor Angela Merkel, as a politician in touch with the prevailing public opinion, insisted that the responsibility should fall on each country separately, not on the European Union collectively. That ruled out the possibility of a common treasury just when it was needed. That was the beginning of the euro crisis. Crises in individual countries like Greece, Italy, or Ireland are essentially variants of the euro crisis.

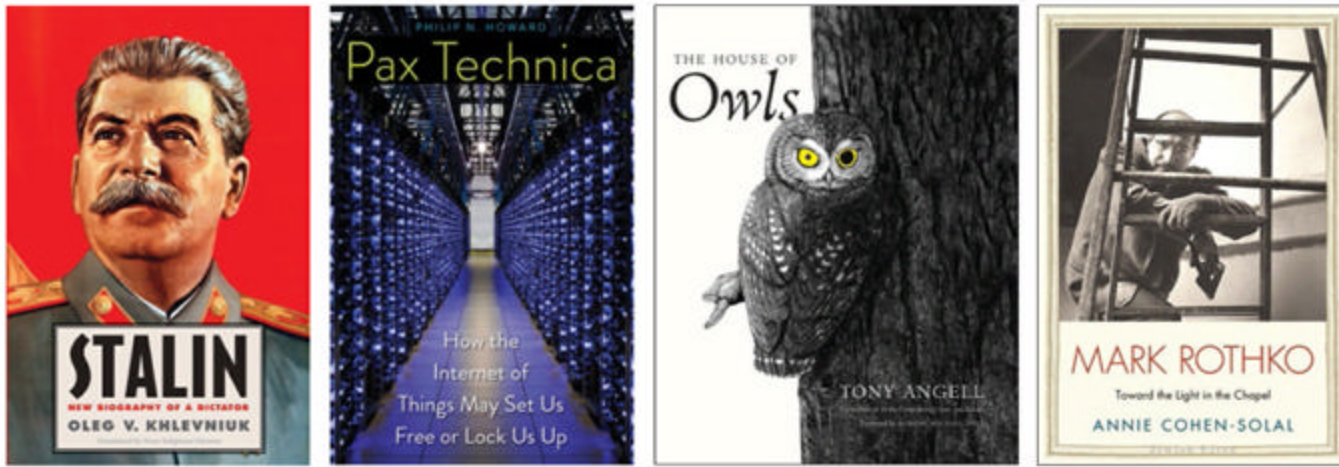
Subsequently, the financial crisis has morphed into a series of political crises. The differences between creditor countries and debtor countries have transformed the European Union from a voluntary association of equals into a relationship between creditors, such as Germany, and debtors, such as Greece, that is neither voluntary nor equal and arouses increasing political tensions.

The European Union started out as a valiant attempt at international governance on a regional scale. In the aftermath of 2008, the EU became preoccupied with its internal problems and failed to pull its weight in the international economy. The United States also became inward-looking but by a somewhat different route. The inward turn of the EU and US led to a decline in international cooperation on a global scale.

Since the Western powers are the mainstay of the prevailing world order, their declining influence has created a power vacuum in international governance. Aspiring regional powers and nonstate actors, which are willing to use military force, have rushed to fill the vacuum. Armed conflicts have proliferated and spread from the Middle East to other parts of Asia, Africa, and even Europe.

By annexing Crimea and establishing separatist enclaves in Ukraine, Putin's Russia has challenged both the prevailing world order, which depends on the Western powers for support, and the values and principles on which the EU was founded. Neither the European nor the American public is fully aware of the severity of the challenge. President Vladimir Putin wants to destabilize all of Ukraine by precipitating a financial and political collapse for which he can disclaim responsibility, while avoiding occupation of a part of eastern Ukraine, which would then depend on Russia for economic support. He has demonstrated





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his preference by twice converting an assured military victory into a cease-fire that threatened to destabilize all of Ukraine. Unfortunately, Putin is succeeding, as can be seen by comparing the “Minsk Two” cease-fire with “Minsk One,” even if his success is purely temporary. Putin now seeks to use Ukraine to sow dissension and gain political influence within the European Union.

The severity of the Russian threat is directly correlated with the weakness of the European Union. The EU has excelled at muddling through financial and political crises but now it is confronted with not one but five crises: Russia, Ukraine, Greece, immigration, and the coming British referendum on EU membership—and that may be too much. The very survival of the EU is at risk.

International governance on a global scale is equally fragile. The world may break up into rival camps both financially and politically. China has begun to build a parallel set of financial institutions, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB); the Asian Bond Fund Initiative; the New Development Bank (formerly the BRICS Bank); and the Chiang Mai Initiative, which is an Asian regional multilateral arrangement to swap currencies. Whether the two camps will be able to keep their rivalry within bounds will depend on how China manages its economic transition and on how the US reacts to it.

The International Monetary Fund could play a positive part in this. It has abandoned its commitment to the Washington Consensus but the controlling shareholders of the Bretton Woods institutions—the US, the UK, France, and Germany among them—are unwilling to relinquish their voting control by increasing the representation of the developing world. This is very shortsighted on their part because it does not recognize changes in the relative weight of various economies and particularly the rise of China.

The controlling shareholders are unlikely to abandon their control, however tenuous; but the IMF has an opportunity to build a binding connection between the two camps. The opportunity arises from the fact that the composition of the IMF’s Special Drawing Rights (SDR) basket will be up for its five-yearly review at the end of 2015.

The SDR is an international reserve asset, created by the IMF in 1969 to supplement the existing official reserves of member countries. The Chinese renminbi is not fully qualified to be included in the SDR basket, but the qualifications to be included are not as rigorously defined as is generally believed. The Japanese yen was introduced when it was not yet widely traded; the franc entered the basket when the French capital account was heavily controlled; and the Saudi riyal was introduced when it was completely pegged to the US currency. The criteria for inclusion have changed over the years but now call for (1) a large exporter country and (2) a “freely usable” currency. This term is often misconstrued as imposing complete convertibility of capital accounts and flexibility of exchange rates; but that is not the case. Indeed, the basket of Special Drawing Rights formerly included

currencies with no or little capital account convertibility.

The Chinese leadership has now embarked on a major effort to have the renminbi included in the SDR basket, and the IMF staff is sympathetic. For instance, it has announced that the renminbi is “no longer undervalued,” and it doesn’t seek full and precipitous capital account liberalization, but rather a cautious and gradual pace of reform in order to ensure the smooth functioning of the SDR and the preservation of financial stability in China.

Much now depends on the attitude of the US government, which holds veto rights in the IMF—even if the decision regarding the SDR basket requires only a 70 percent majority of the IMF’s board. The US would be making a major concession if it opened the door to allowing the renminbi to become a potential rival to the dollar. It could demand similar concessions from China in return, but that would be the wrong approach. The relationship between two great powers is not a zero-sum game: one party’s gain is not necessarily a loss for the other.

China is seeking SDR status for the renminbi not to please or hurt the US but for reasons of its own that are only indirectly connected with China’s ultimate ambition of replacing the US dollar as the dominant currency in the world. China seeks to use financial liberalization as an engine of growth for the Chinese economy. China wants to deepen the government bond market and open it up to international investors in order to enable the central government to clean up the bad debts of insolvent local authorities; it also wants to reduce the excessive leverage in the economy by promoting conversions of debt to equity. Inclusion of the renminbi in the IMF basket would facilitate the process, and success would automatically advance the renminbi’s weight and influence in the world.

The US government has little to gain and much to lose by treating the relationship with China as a zero-sum game. In other words it has little bargaining power. It could, of course, obstruct China’s progress, but that would be very dangerous. President Xi Jinping has taken personal responsibility for the economy and national security. If his market-oriented reforms fail, he may foster some external conflicts to keep the country united and maintain himself in power. This could lead China to align itself with Russia not only financially but also politically and militarily. In that case, should the external conflict escalate into a military confrontation with an ally of the United States such as Japan, it is not an exaggeration to say that we would be on the threshold of a third world war.

Indeed, military budgets are rapidly increasing both in Russia and in China, and they remain at a very high level in the United States. For China, rearmament would be a surefire way to boost domestic demand. China is already flexing its military muscle in the South China Sea, operating in a unilateral

and often quite belligerent manner, which is causing justifiable concern in Washington. Nevertheless, it may take a decade or more until a Russian–Chinese military alliance would be ready to confront the US directly. Until then, we may expect a continuation of hybrid warfare and the proliferation of proxy wars.

Both the US and China have a vital interest in reaching an understanding because the alternative is so unpalatable. The benefits of an eventual agreement between China and the US could be equally far-reaching. Recently there has been a real breakthrough on climate policy on a bilateral basis. By taking the nonbinding representations and

would be easy to accomplish. The two countries have fundamentally different political systems. While the US is founded on the principle of individual freedom, China has no significant tradition of such freedom. It has had a hierarchical structure since time immemorial and it has been an empire throughout most of its history. In recent years the US has led the world in the innovative development of social media, while China has led the world in finding means to control it. Since the end of the cold war, China has been much more successful than Russia in creating a successful hierarchical system.

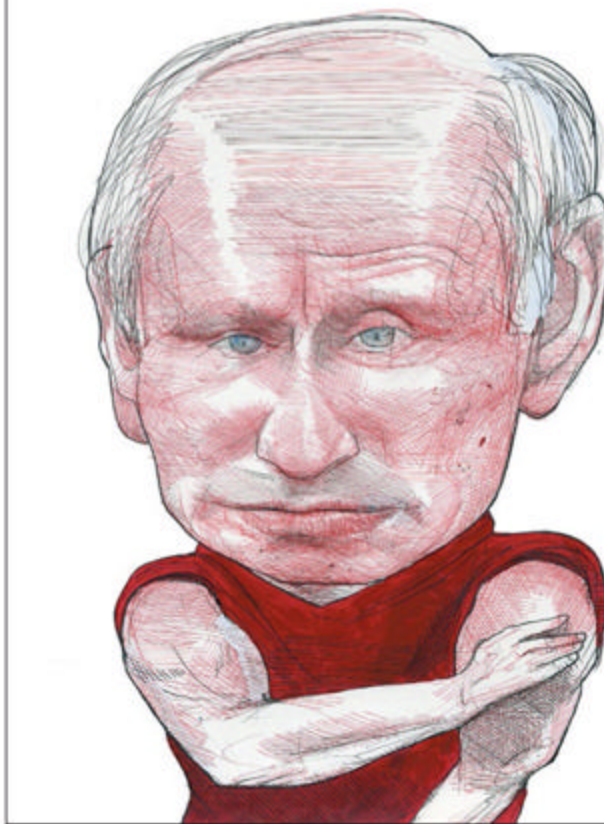
This is best seen by looking at the way information is distributed. Since the rise of social media, information increasingly travels along horizontal lines, but China is different: information is distributed vertically. Within the party–state apparatus, the closer one is to the top, the better one is informed and the more latitude one enjoys in expressing an opinion. This means that the party–state apparatus offers not only an opportunity for personal enrichment but also a semblance of individual freedom. No wonder that the apparatus has been able to attract much of China’s best talent. The degree of latitude it allows is, however, strictly circumscribed by red lines. People have to walk within a grid; those who transgress the red lines may fall into the hands of the security apparatus and disappear without a trace.

The stranglehold of the security apparatus was gradually diminishing but recently there has been an ominous reversal: under the leadership of President Xi the informal rules defining the rights and status of NGOs, for instance, are now in the process of being significantly tightened.\*

Comparing President Xi’s “Chinese dream” with the American dream highlights the difference between the two political and social systems. Xi extols China’s success in “rejuvenating the nation” by harnessing the talents and energies of its people in service of the state. By contrast, the American dream extols the success of the rugged individual who achieves upward social mobility and material prosperity by overcoming obstacles posed by social conventions or prejudices or authorities abusing their power, or sheer bad luck. The US would like China to adopt its values but the Chinese leadership considers them subversive.

In this respect China has more in common with Russia than with the US. Both Russia and China consider themselves victims of America’s aspiration to world domination. From the US point of view, there is much to disapprove of in China’s behavior. There is no independent judiciary and multinational companies are often mistreated and replaced by domestic favorites. And there are conflicts with the US and other nations in the South China Sea and over cyberwarfare and human

Vladimir Putin



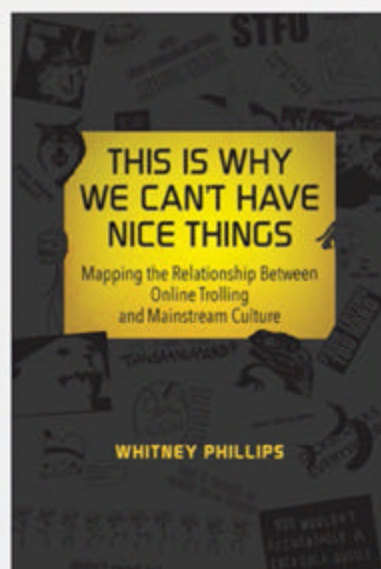
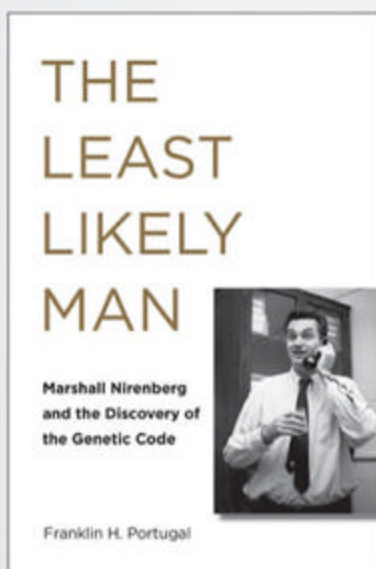
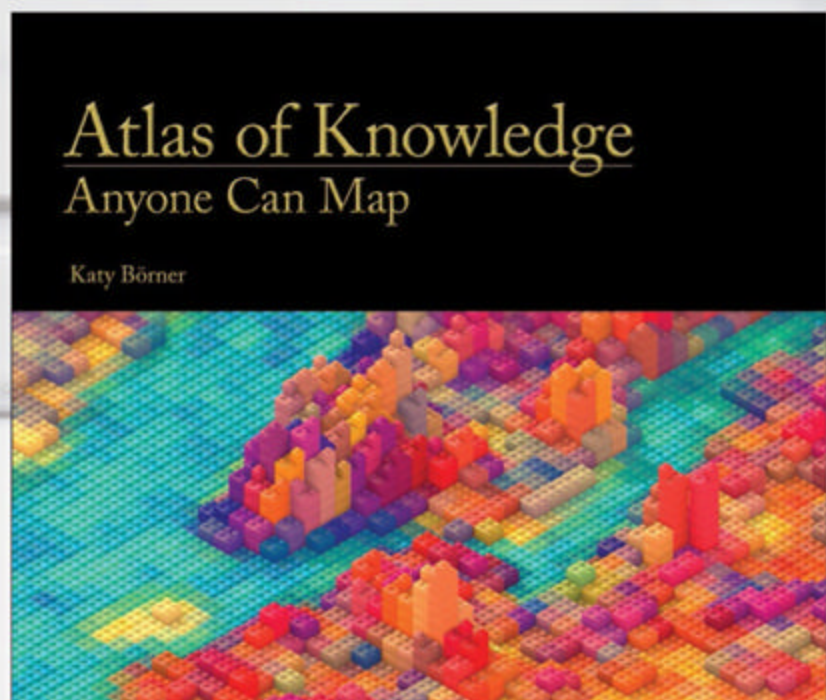
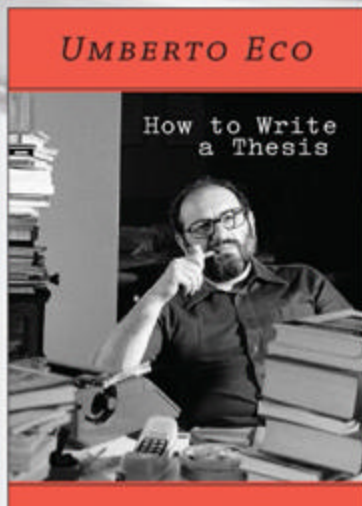
promises made by the two countries at face value, the agreement has made more credible some recent efforts to bring climate change under control. If this approach could be extended to other aspects of energy policy and to the financial and economic spheres, the threat of a military alignment between China and Russia would be removed and the prospect of a global conflict would be greatly diminished. That is worth trying.

On his last state visit to the US in 2013, President Xi spoke of a “new type of great power relationship.” The subject has been widely discussed in China since then. President Obama should outline his own vision by drawing a distinction between Putin’s Russia, which has replaced the rule of law with the rule of force, and today’s China, which does not always abide by the rule of law but respects its treaty obligations. Russian aggression needs to be firmly resisted; by contrast China needs to be encouraged—by offering a more constructive alternative—to avoid the route of military aggression. This kind of offer may elicit a favorable response. Rivalry between the US and China is inevitable but it needs to be kept within bounds that would preclude the use of military force.

It does not follow that a far-reaching agreement amounting to a strategic partnership between the US and China

\*See Edward Wong, “Chinese Security Laws Elevate the Party and Stifle Dissent. Mao Would Approve,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2015.





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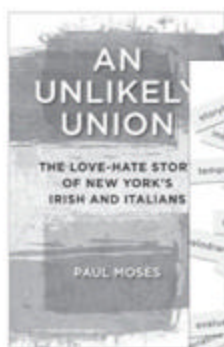
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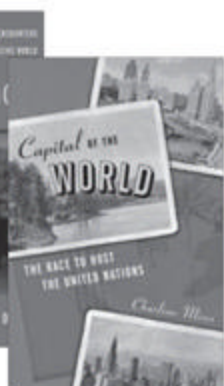
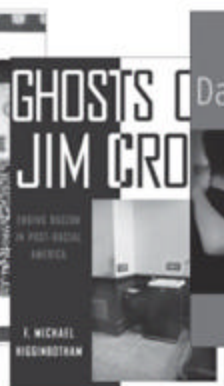
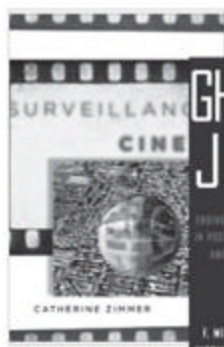
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rights. These are not matters on which cooperation will be easy to achieve.

Fully recognizing these difficulties, the US government should nevertheless make a bona fide attempt at forging a strategic partnership with China. This would involve identifying areas of common interest as well as areas of rivalry. The former would invite cooperation, the latter tit-for-tat bargaining. The US needs to develop a two-pronged strategy that offers incentives for cooperation and deterrents that render tit-for-tat bargaining less attractive.

The areas for cooperation may prove to be wider than is obvious at first sight. Cooperating with China in making President Xi's financial reforms successful is definitely in the common interest. Success would fulfill the aspirations of the ever-increasing Chinese middle class. It may also allow Xi to relax some of the restrictions he has recently introduced and that would, in turn, increase the probability that his reforms will succeed and improve global financial stability. The weak point of his current approach is that both implementing and monitoring the reform process are in the same hands. Opening up the process to criticism by the media and civil society would greatly improve the efficacy of his reforms. This is particularly true of Xi's anticorruption campaign. And if China followed this path, it would become increasingly attractive to the US as a strategic partner.

Negotiations between the US and China could not possibly be completed by October 2015, when the board of the IMF is scheduled to consider the composition of the SDR basket. Realistically it would take until President Xi's state visit to Washington in September to complete the preparations. But there is much to be gained by extending the SDR deadline to 2016. China will then host the meeting of the G20, and 2016 will also be the last year of the Obama administration. The prospect of a strategic partnership between the US and China would mobilize all political

forces in favor of international cooperation on both sides.

If a bona fide attempt fails, the US would then be fully justified in developing a strong enough partnership with China's neighbors that a Chinese-Russian alliance would not dare to challenge it by military force. That would be clearly inferior to a strategic partnership between the US and China. A partnership with China's neighbors would return us to a cold war, but that would still be preferable to a third world war.

The Trans-Pacific and Trans-Atlantic Partnerships, which are currently being negotiated, could offer an excellent opportunity for a two-pronged strategy but the current approach is all wrong. At present China is excluded; indeed the partnerships are conceived as an anti-Chinese alliance under US leadership. The president has asked Congress to give him and his successor authority for up to six years to negotiate trade agreements under fast-track rules that would deprive Congress of its right to introduce amendments. The bill has passed the Senate and at this writing is before the House. If the House approves, President Xi may be presented with an apparent threat on his visit in September. This is an appropriate response to China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea and elsewhere, but it leaves little room for an alternative approach. It would, as a result, be difficult for President Obama to make a bona fide offer of strategic partnership.

It is to be hoped that the House will not authorize putting the bill on a fast track. Instead of railroading the bill through Congress, it ought to be taken off the fast track. In that case, Congress would have plenty of time to correct the fundamental flaws in the proposed treaties that make them unacceptable as they are currently written. And that would also allow President Obama to make President Xi a genuine offer of a strategic partnership with China when he visits Washington in September. □

## FIUMICINO, MORNING

Effortlessly the buzzard strokes  
the midway air,  
each wingtip's splayed feather  
darkly visible where,  
above the concrete apron

and the parched earth  
splashed with poppies  
and those flowers known as  
the eyebrows of Zeus,  
it tilts and rides the thermals,

above the runway's game-board  
shapes of the geometer,  
cone and cylinder,  
dihedral, rhombus, delta,  
whose skin-deep miracles of surface

sufficed for us to fly,  
as a blue-suited man  
puts his head in the mouth of an engine  
that has crossed an ocean,  
turns away and pops a Pez in his mouth.

—Karl Kirchwey





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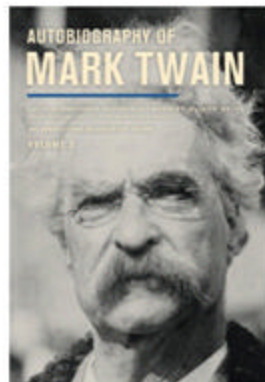


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Edited by James A. Ganz

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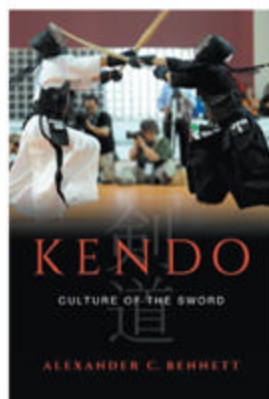


### 500 CAPP STREET

#### *David Ireland's House*

Constance M. Lewallen

*500 Capp Street* tells the story of David Ireland's house, a rundown Victorian in the Mission District of San Francisco that the artist transformed into an environmental artwork, refashioning the detritus of his restoration labors as well as objects left behind by previous owners. Generously illustrated, this is an invaluable and intimate record of Ireland's best-known work.



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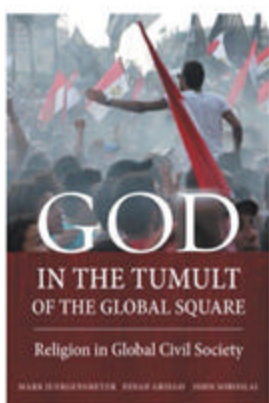


### POSTDATE

#### *Photography and Inherited History in India*

Jodi Throckmorton, Atreyee Gupta, Latika Gupta, Raqs Media Collective, & Susan Krane

What makes the rich photographic legacy of India so important is the incursion of the medium's mute ghosts on present-day visual culture—and the magnitude of photography's role in the inheritance of history in India. *Postdate* is about an interplay between postcolonial contemporary art and colonial-era photography in India. Published in association with the San Jose Museum of Art.

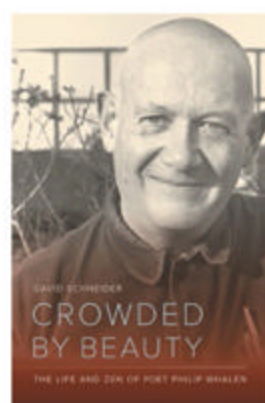


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—Alice Notley, author of *Negativity's Kiss*



# Catching Hold of the Devious City

Michael Greenberg

New York street photographers were among the great flâneurs of the twentieth century. These weaponized observers with their loaded metal boxes (so much more conspicuous than reporters with their pocket-sized notebooks) did their most striking work in the 1940s and 1950s.

One thinks of Helen Levitt's image, from 1940, of a man on a Sahara-like expanse of New York City asphalt, pulling tight his overcoat while twisting down toward his leg as if to locate and wipe off a stain. Levitt maintains an unobtrusive distance from the man, who is all shape and gesture, the shrouded, faceless inhabitant of his clothes. There's a hint of the Surrealists in his aloneness—"the tensions and desolations of creatures in naked space," James Agee wrote of Levitt's work. But what Levitt is after is not a distorted or fantasy city but the city that is, with (in Agee's fine phrase) its "ordinary metropolitan soil."

There's an analogous feeling in Robert Frank's photograph entitled *On Saturday and Sunday the street is empty. Georgie is alone* (1951). Georgie is a four- or five-year-old boy, in the foreground of a long peopleless street that appears to stretch in a narrowing ribbon all the way to the end of the metropolis. The boy is anything but faceless, however—he looks at the camera with frank curiosity, a solid little figure, more intelligent than vulnerable, his bare arms, still thick with baby fat, hanging by his sides.

A similar aura emanates from the work of at least half a dozen other New York photographers of the time. Some of their images are vaguer, grainier, more abstract, but the sensibilities of these flâneurs seemed to spill into one another, as if they were guided by an overarching psychological affinity, a shared state of mind. Part of it is their use of 35mm film, with its stark areas of abysmal darkness and exploding light. But it is also the particular way they approached the city, catching it in a kind of out-of-time motion, with no staging, no agenda, so that looking at their work today one senses a single, concentrated project. Theirs seemed to be the perfect expression of the in-the-moment rush that the Beats tried to get, with much poorer results, in their writing.

In 1992, the curator Jane Livingston published a book called *The New York School: Photographs, 1936–1963*. Livingston included sixteen photographers in her group, spanning two generations: from Alexey Brodovitch, born in 1898 in Russia, to Don Donaghy, born in Philadelphia in 1936.<sup>1</sup> They weren't photo-journalists; they didn't shoot still lifes or manipulate light other than what the moment gave them; they rejected the "socially concerned 'do-gooding' photography" of the 1930s; yet they openly used the techniques of all these styles.

<sup>1</sup>The others are Levitt, Frank, Sid Grossman, Lisette Model, Louis Faurer, William Klein, Ted Croner, Weegee, Saul Leiter, Leon Levinstein, David Vestal, Bruce Davidson, Diane Arbus, and Richard Avedon.

Robert Capa's astonishing photographs of the Spanish civil war and of the D-Day invasion in 1944 had demonstrated that the imperfections of grain and blur could convey a surge of urgency rather than being hallmarks of a "bad picture." These became essential elements for almost all of the New York photographers. William Klein's image *Big Blow Up, Grainy Woman's Face* (1955) takes this to an extreme, turning the viewer into a nearly blind per-

son capable of distinguishing only the broadest aspects of light and darkness. Sid Grossman, an influential photographer and teacher, and one of the older members of Livingston's group, remarked that "what is characteristic of all bad photography is the fact that the photograph itself is at most as good as life itself, as the object itself." He told his students that "the function of the photographer... is... to come back with the revelation of new and important facts." To be a photographer, Grossman believed, you had to "change your positions" and take on "a completely new attitude toward the people you are dealing with, toward everything you do in this world."

Grossman was forty-two when he died, in 1955. He had been a Communist, was hounded by the government during McCarthyism, and forced out



Saul Leiter: Red Umbrella, circa 1955

## BOOKS AND FILMS DRAWN ON FOR THIS REVIEW

### The New York School: Photographs, 1936–1963

by Jane Livingston.  
Stewart, Tabori and Chang,  
403 pp. (1992)

### Saul Leiter: Early Black and White

with essays by Max Kozloff  
and Jane Livingston.  
Steidl/Howard Greenberg Library,  
two volumes, 388 pp., \$90.00  
(to be available in the US in August)

**In No Great Hurry:  
13 Lessons in Life with Saul Leiter**  
a documentary film by Tomas Leach

### Saul Leiter: Early Color

with an introduction  
by Martin Harrison.  
Steidl, 176 pp., \$50.00  
(to be available in the US in August)

### Saul Leiter: Retrospektive

edited by Ingo Taubhorn  
and Brigitte Woischnik,  
with essays by Adam Harrison  
Levy, Vince Aletti,  
Margit Erb, and others.  
Berlin: Kehrer, 294 pp., \$65.00

photography as "an act of living, [not] a search for something interesting, for something that is more or less sensational, something that is different." This "act of living" was what made taking pictures a personal endeavor.

Henri Cartier-Bresson also used the phrase in the introduction to his book *The Decisive Moment*, published in 1952:

I believe that through the act of living, the discovery of oneself is

<sup>2</sup>During its fifteen years of existence, the Photo League was probably New York's most important gathering place for photographers, and one of the only places in the city that regularly mounted contemporary photographic exhibitions. In 1947, the US attorney general put it on the list of "subversive" organizations. In 1951 it was forced to close down.

made concurrently with the discovery of the world around us... A balance must be established between these two worlds—the one inside us and the one outside us. As a result of a constant reciprocal process, both these worlds come to form a single one. And it is this world that we must communicate.

The passage became a kind of aesthetic manifesto, but in 1952 it was a common idea. The search for a balance between what's inside and what's outside, between reality and imagination, between one's particular consciousness—with its experiences, associations, and memories that come to bear on the way each of us sees and feels at every instant—and the hard fact of what objectively *is*, is one of the fundamental struggles of all human beings. To meld them into a single world and to communicate that world has been the business of the artist for at least a thousand years.

What was new was Cartier-Bresson's application of this idea to photography, and his implicit elevation of it to an art form equal to literature or painting. The notion that the camera was an "instrument of detection," as Lisette Model put it, "the instrument I am asking a question with," and that the photographer could project herself into a subject in an instant of heightened intuition (the picture "that springs from life," in Cartier-Bresson's words), was at the center of how the New York photographers went about their craft.

By 1960, most of them had stopped taking black-and-white street pictures because they believed it had become a cliché. Found movement and gestures, blurred revelations, grotesqueries and unexpected shapes, seemed to leave room only for repetition. A mere twenty years later, the flaring light and haloes that were integral to the look of those photographs had become, from a technical point of view, almost impossible to achieve.

Sid Kaplan, who printed Robert Frank's photographs beginning in the 1960s, told an interviewer in 1985 that you couldn't get that light any longer because the new lenses are "super-coated and multi-coated." Kaplan explained:

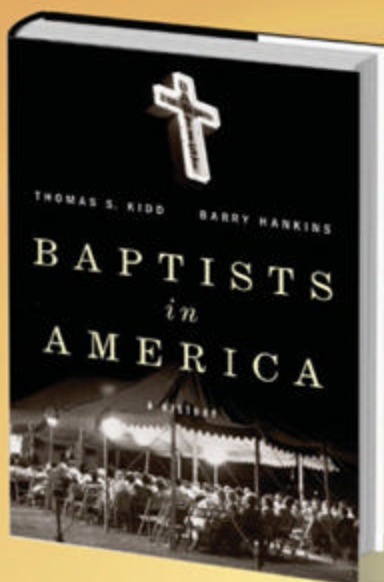
Shooting today with the new equipment you could go out and get a lens that's thirty years old, but another thing is the film. They've refined the film so much with all these super good anti-halation backings that even if you get one of those lenses, they've corrected the film so the light would never flair out.

The subjective photographic style of the so-called New York School has gone from being a cliché to being inimitable.

At the time that Livingston's book was published, Saul Leiter was probably the least known of the sixteen photographers in her group. He was also the most unlike the others. Livingston

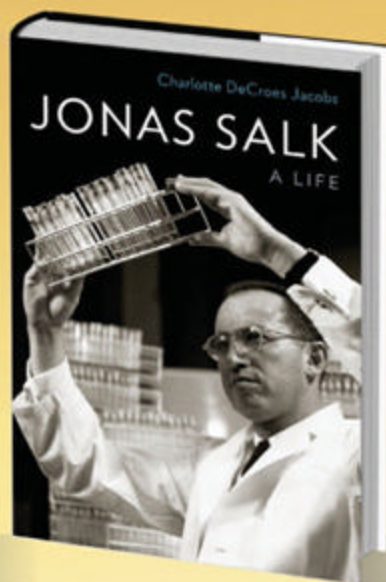
Saul Leiter Foundation/Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York





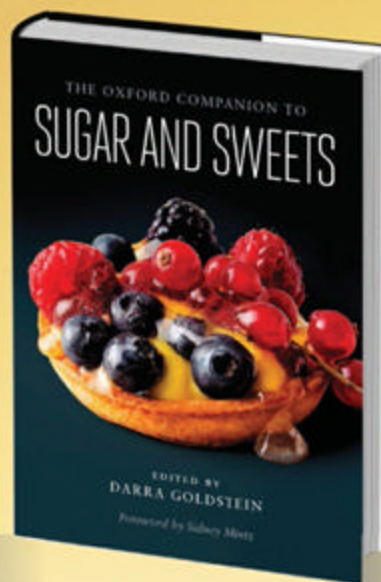
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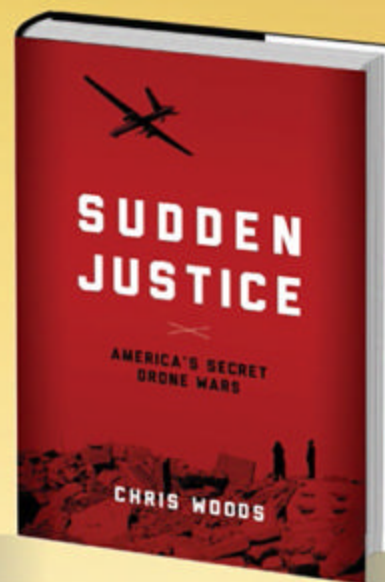
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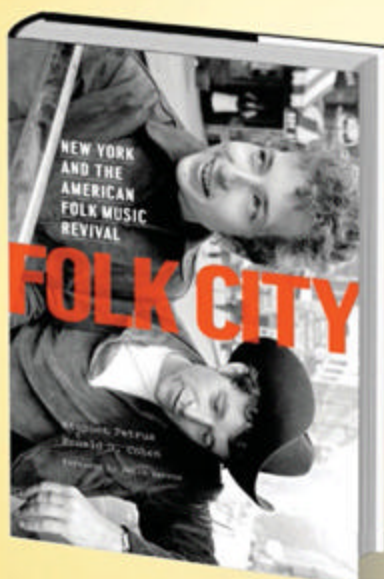
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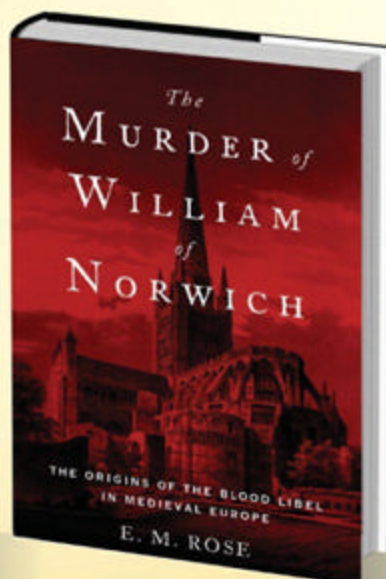
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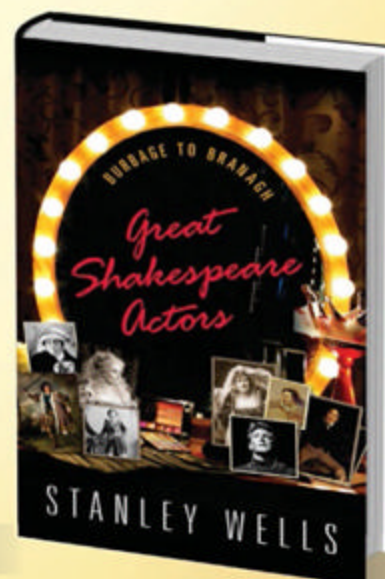
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offers a sampling of his black-and-white pictures, but during that same period he was the only one working with color, and it is in color that we recognize his genius.

Leiter began photographing with Kodachrome and Ansochrome film in the late 1940s. At the time, Kodachrome was determinedly lowbrow, associated with vacation and suburban barbecue snapshots. Otherwise, color was the province of *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, and a handful of other magazines that could afford to pay for the dye-transfer process, the only way to make quality prints out of transparencies or slides. Color was for prettifying clothes and jewelry, not for art.<sup>3</sup>

As late as 1969 Walker Evans was calling color "vulgar." He scrupulously muted the hues in his own occasional forays into color, so as not, in his words, to "[blow] you down with . . . a bebop of electric blues, furious reds, and poison greens." Cartier-Bresson, for his part, objected to color because it added what he considered to be an unnecessarily complicating element to photography—the ineffable moment of a great image might be upon you and the colors would be at war. The prevailing belief was that it corrupted the pure juxtaposition of darkness and light of monochrome film.

What was perhaps most objectionable about color to many of the New York street photographers of the 1950s was that, by emphasizing the mechanistic nature of taking pictures, it threatened to diminish the photographer's psychological presence in the image. This wasn't technically true, of course—color and black-and-white are equally beholden to the machine in hand. But it seemed to introduce an element of falseness, separating both the viewer and the photographer from the image, the very condition that the New York photographers strove to transcend.

Leiter photographed through windows, through rain, under awnings and canopies, and through the spaces between construction site boards to create (or more accurately, to show) a mystery of activity and simultaneous perspectives. Often his subject seems to be color and light itself. His pictures can be looked at as abstractions, but they never deviate too far from what is recognizably real. A blooming red umbrella materializes behind a yellow taxi in a storm; three Rothko-like panels of darkness frame an ordinary street scene with window-shoppers, walking pedestrians, and a passing white car. They seem to be instructing us in a new way to take in the city.

Leiter's color photography offers its own version of chance: an attunement to the visual masterpieces that can be found in almost every urban instant. The endless, accidental rearrangement of these images belongs not to the world we understand or think about, but the world we perceive. They are fleeting, ephemeral, either missed or, just

as likely, forgotten. Of all the types of memory that we possess, sensory memory is the briefest. A flash of sunlight, the blinking of a traffic signal, a passing train, a tree glimpsed among thousands of trees—most sensory experiences disappear without a trace, present time spooling mercifully away. Leiter rediscovers for us this unspooling world. He shows us what we are unable to retain, if we ever fully saw it at all.

His colors almost always possess a blended, continuous quality. Yet he rarely cropped his prints or interfered with the developing process beyond bringing up contrasts; when you compare his prints to his negatives, the borders of the images are the same. Occasionally he shot with Kodachrome that had passed its sell-by date, in order to get a washed or scrubbed look. Cer-



Saul Leiter: Adele with Friend, circa 1947

tainly his photographs were devoid of Walker Evans's dreaded "electric blues" or "poison greens."

Helen Levitt began using color in the 1960s, because she thought she could be "closer to reality if I got the color of the streets." In one of her color photographs you will see a sky-blue bathing suit on an otherwise naked man, in another, graffiti on a wall behind a cluster of children. But these splashes of color don't substantially alter the way you experience her work; her black-and-white images have a similar feeling.

On the other hand, I can't imagine Leiter's color photographs existing in any other form. Most of his black-and-white exteriors have a remarkably different quality: nuns in full black billowing habits photographed from behind; shoes, hats, furs, and other objects imbued with the character of the people who own them; an idle wooden cart. There is, above all, an ambiguity in Leiter's color images. He rarely focused on a single object, but on a concatenation of objects and people, the viewer's focal point constantly shifting, the pictures themselves filled with refractions through dirty bus or taxi or café windows with their accreted slashes and smears.

He stands apart from his contemporaries in the way he seemed to let his photographs seep toward him. You almost never get the sense that he has muscled his images into being. He didn't go out in search of suitable subjects, such as circus performers (as Ted Croner did) or gang members (Bruce Davidson) or ballet dancers (Alexey Brodovitch) or Coney Island physiques (Sid Grossman). His photographs are the embodiment of the oblique, the

peripheral, the ricochet. His disorienting reflections and complicated visual parentheses keep you peering at his images the way you might linger on a poem, wondering where the camera is placed, where Leiter is standing, whether he actually perceived the vague narrative suggestion in the far corner of the print.

Ambiguity appeared to be a central aspect of his character as well as his work. In 2013, the filmmaker Tomas Leach released a documentary about Leiter, *In No Great Hurry*. The entire film takes place in Leiter's New York apartment and on the streets immediately surrounding it. On the screen we are introduced to an eighty-seven-year-old man with a pleasant, creased,

decision, not with regret but with lingering shame. Later, speaking of his work, he tells Leach, "I see no reason to apologize," as if some invisible force was provoking him to do so.

There is something heartbreaking about Leiter when he speaks of his father, as if measuring himself against him has kept him in a perpetual adolescence. He uses the word "great" to describe him, with the understanding that greatness is not a desirable achievement. He was "a great Talmudic scholar, a light in the diaspora," he says with a warring measure of derision and pride. "Greatness was important . . . great scholarship . . . intellectual achievement . . . knowing a great deal was important. Kindness? Well, if it interfered with the pursuit of knowledge and greatness and learning and scholarship, too bad. Get rid of it." At one point, speaking of himself, he tells Leach, "I'm not carried away by the greatness of Mr. Leiter." At another point he teasingly refers to himself as "a minor figure."

Yet behind his self-deprecations are glimpses of a long-nourished ambition that he must have had in order to work stubbornly on. "Am I a heroic figure?" he asks rhetorically. "A giant straddling across the mountains of photography? I don't think so." He slyly manages to apply to himself the language of Olympian achievement.

After he turned away from his rabbinical studies, it was as if nothing he did could be serious. Seriousness, like marriage and family life for Kafka, belonged to his father. He had repudiated "nobility, purity, observance" in favor of the most evanescent instances of color and light that make no conscious claim on profundity.

Leiter, however, did submit his father to the interpretations of his camera. In a black-and-white photograph included in *Saul Leiter: Early Black and White*, taken in 1940 when Leiter was seventeen, Wolf, wearing an indoor Orthodox hat, round steel-rimmed glasses, and a trimmed beard, leans forward, concentrating on the book he is holding, a man beyond the temptation of frivolous distraction. Saul's brother David (who did become a rabbi) crouches by his father's side, a round-faced young man looking at the camera with stoical discomfort. Saul is hunched directly behind Wolf, wearing an almost identical hat, but with the slightly conspiratorial look of one who is already plotting his crime.

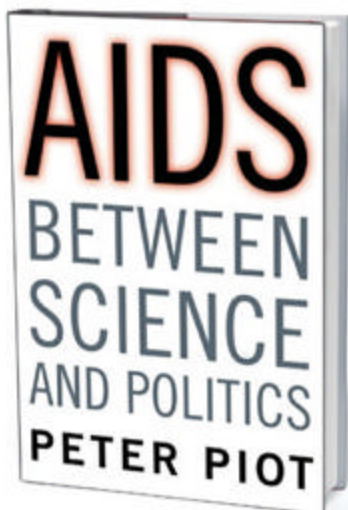
The photograph, of course, is posed. One imagines Leiter setting his camera up with a timer, placing the book in his father's hands, instructing his brother where to stand. It was his way of having the final word.

Despite Leiter's determination to remove himself from the horse race of important artists, his reputation, such as it was, never completely disappeared. Poor timing aided him in his project. In 1951, the Photo League was to sponsor a two-man show of Leiter's and Robert Frank's work, but the Justice Department closed the league down for being a "subversive organization" before the show could open.

Two years later, Edward Steichen included Leiter's black-and-white photographs in a group show at MoMA called "Always the Young Stranger," an event that would have been significant to the career of any young photographer, but

<sup>3</sup>The photographers Arthur Siegel and Ernst Haas, who are not affiliated with the New York School, were also experimenting with color on city streets at the time. It's difficult to know what effect their work had on Leiter's or vice versa. In 1962, MoMA mounted a ten-year retrospective of Haas's color work. But it wasn't until the exhibition of photographs by William Eggleston at MoMA in 1976 that color photography, as art, became more widely accepted.





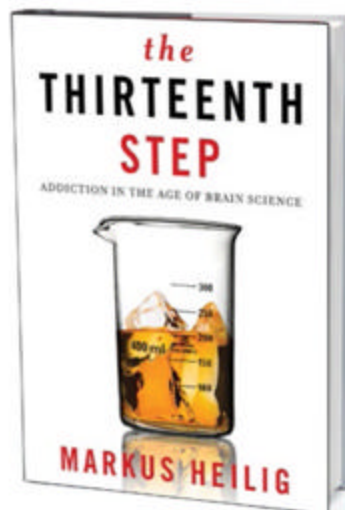
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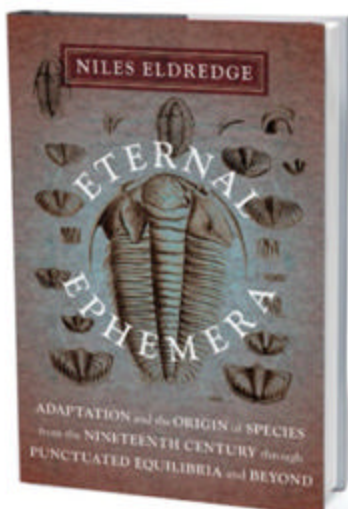
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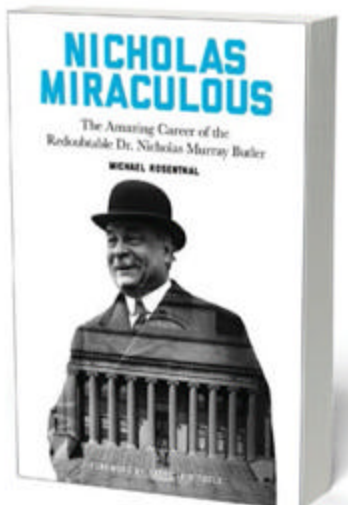
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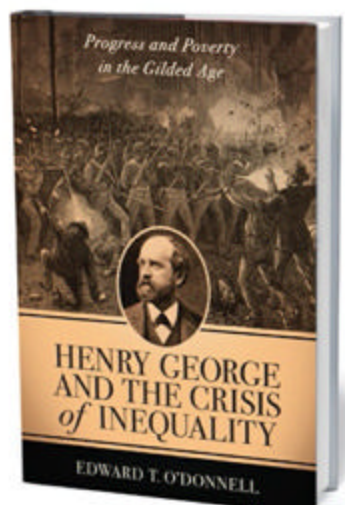
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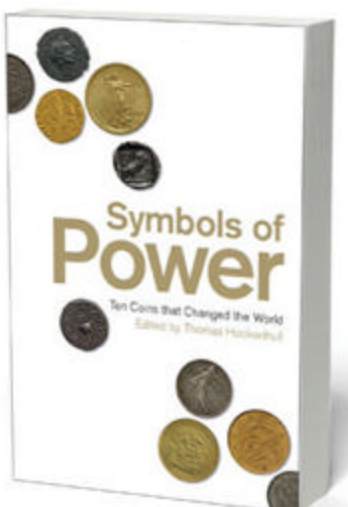
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one that Leiter would later say he had failed to appreciate. In 1955, Steichen invited Leiter to be part of what would become the hugely successful “Family of Man” exhibition at MoMA. Leiter, apparently having doubts about the worthiness of his work, declined.

In the 1960s he supported himself as a fashion photographer, mostly for *Harper's Bazaar*. After about ten years—partly because advertising directors lost patience with his penchant for shooting out on the street, using available light, when possible—the fashion work dried up.

Decades of almost complete obscurity and penury followed. In 1992, his reputation suffered a slight lift when Jane Livingston included him in her

*New York School*. According to Margit Erb, Leiter's assistant late in his life, Richard Avedon steered Livingston to Leiter, telling her, “He needs you.”

With the publication of *Early Color* in 2006, Leiter abruptly became famous. He was eighty-two, and the amiable public idea of him as a pure artistic soul working for no gain, while enjoying what he called “the tremendous advantage of being unimportant,” was formed.

During his time in New York, he lived in only two apartments. The first was at 99 Perry Street in the West Village, where he moved in 1946 when he first came to the city; the second was at 111 East 10th Street between Second and Third Avenues, where he stayed from

1952 until his death in 2013. At least 95 percent of his photographs were taken a block or two from these apartments. Time and again you see 10th Street in his most potent images. He seemed to venture no further than the corner. He knew the street so well that he could pick up its shifts, its rhythms. He shot what was in front of him. It was a constant investigation of the familiar, of what he saw every day, in every weather and circumstance. Most photographers would become numb to such visual repetitions, but for Leiter it comprised a kind of treasure world—more than enough material for his lifetime.

Margit Erb, who is archiving Leiter's work, estimates that he left more than 250,000 negatives and slides—so

we can expect a lot of new material to emerge in the coming years. Erb and the Howard Greenberg Gallery are already organizing monographs and exhibitions from what they have unearthed in the 10th Street apartment.

Janet Malcolm has written that “photographers need to be protected... against photography's plentitude. If a photographer's achievement is not to be buried under an avalanche of images, his offerings to the world must be drastically pruned.” Leiter himself lamented that the ratio of clicks to a single worthy picture is about a thousand to one. One trusts that the pruning of his work will be done in such a way as to reinforce the brilliance of this singular artist. □

## Trapped in the Virtual Classroom

David Bromwich

I was asked to address the Yale Political Union on the topic “Resolved: Embrace Online Education.” I agreed to speak in the negative. Let me start with a proposition: the great social calamity of our time is that people are being replaced by machines. This is happening and it will go on happening. But we may want to stop or slow the process when we have a chance, in order to ask a large question. To what extent are the uniquely human elements of our lives, things not reproducible by mechanical or technical substitutes, the result of *spontaneous or unplanned experience*? Such experience, whatever we think of it, is made possible by the arts of give-and-take that we learn in the physical presence of human beings.

American society is still on the near side of robotification. People who can't conjure up the relevant sympathy in the presence of other people are still felt to need various kinds of remedial help: they are autistic or sociopathic, it may be said—those are two of a range of clinical terms. Less clinically we may say that such people lack a certain affective range. However efficiently they perform their tasks, we don't yet think well of those who in their everyday lives maximize efficiency and minimize considerate, responsive, and unrehearsed interaction, whether they neglect such things from physiological incapacity or a prudential fear of squandering their energy on emotions that are not formally necessary.

This prejudice continues to be widely shared. But the consensus is visibly weaker than it was a decade ago. As people are replaced by machines—in Britain, they call such people “redundant”—the survivors who remain in prosperous employment are being asked to become more machinelike. This fits with the idea that all the valuable human skills and varieties of knowledge are things that can be assimilated in a machinelike way. We can know the quantity of information involved, and we can program it to be poured into the receiving persons as a kind of “input” that eventually yields the desired “product.” Even in this short summary, however, I have introduced an assumption that you may want to stand back and question. Is it



Buster Keaton in a publicity still for *College*, 1927

really the case that all knowledge is a form of information? Are there some kinds of learning or mental activity that are not connected with, or properly describable as, knowledge?

When H.L. Mencken, an avowed atheist, was asked if he believed in baptism, he replied “Believe in it? I've seen it done!” For thirty-eight years, I've been a teacher of a discipline of interpretation that is fostered in university departments of literature, philosophy, the history of ideas, and to some extent psychology and political science, a discipline that might best be described as an art that can be taught; and if someone asks, “Do you believe

in it?” I can't do better than “Believe in it? I've seen it done.” The discipline I have in mind is not a religious ritual but an educational practice that can seem to the uninitiated as monkish as some aspects of an alien religion.

This discipline can't be called a science as a natural scientist would understand the term. It is not progressive. It has few formulas worth memorizing. It doesn't show its glory in “research programs,” airtight systems of classification, or pathbreaking discoveries that refute a previous century's scientific orthodoxy. Yet the discipline does have perceptible boundaries and teachable methods of confirmation or

falsification, based in large part on the relationship of evidence to assertion, and on the common sense and insight of qualified judges. It imparts a fund of practical wisdom that grows over time and alters its emphasis with the disposition and character of the practitioner.

I will come back to the value of intellectual arts that can be taught, and why such arts are best learned in the presence of actual and not “virtual” teachers. But first let us consider the background assumption I mentioned that accounts for much of the enthusiasm about large-scale online classes, called “massive open online courses,” or MOOCs—classes without the classroom and without the physical student and teacher, working with a set curriculum and transmitting a single format to a virtual classroom of millions. I want to stress that this assumption is only a tendency and not an inevitable part of the argument one might make for digital teaching.

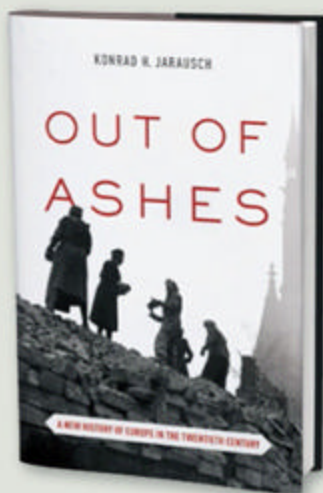
Still, as we look at the movement in its current phase, we ought to ask a series of related questions. Does this movement cooperate with a pressure to make human life ever more machinelike? In the process of approval and acceptance, are we being asked to conceive of knowledge itself as mainly constituted by information? And does knowledge come to be seen therefore as a social good that can be disseminated and assimilated in a uniform and mechanical way, so that finally the amount of good accomplished is to be judged by criteria of efficient satisfaction: by testing, for example, and a regimen of judging test scores?

I don't see how the answers can be in doubt. The MOOC movement cooperates with the tendency of mechanization, indeed it strengthens the tendency, and by its promise of utility, efficiency, uniformity, and the expedited delivery of uniform goods, it discourages more complex thinking about the content and aims of education.

What explains the enthusiasm that the movement has excited among many clever people and even among experienced educators? Populism is oddly mixed, here, with entrepreneurial ambition. The hope is that more people



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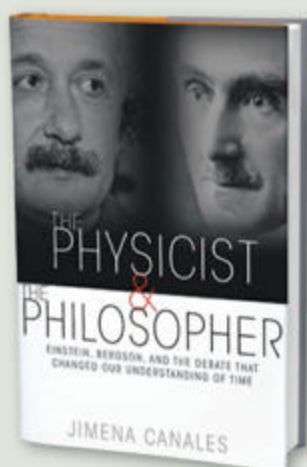
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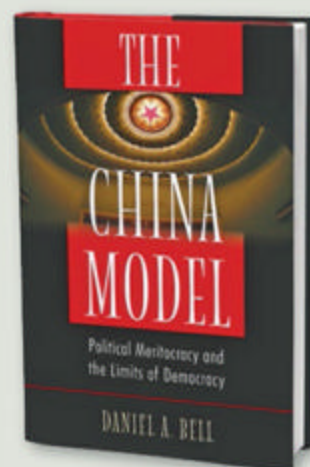
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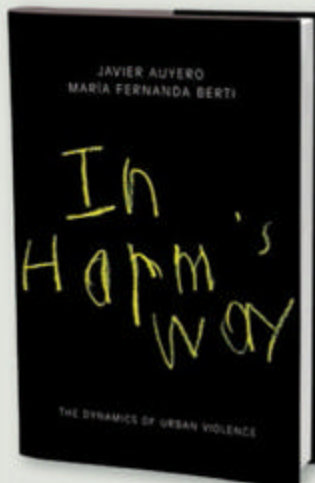
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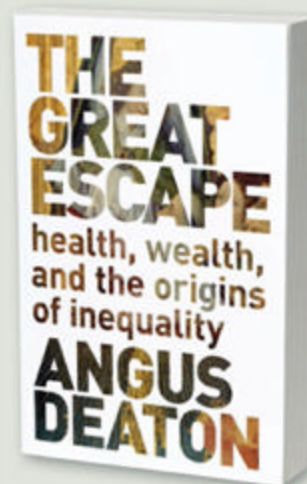
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will learn more things at a lower overall price. Many teachers will be fired in the process, of course, many schools will be reduced, defunded, and abandoned, but we will end up with a more information-filled and educationally satisfied citizenry. Perhaps this hope is to some extent realistic. But I can't help observing that in this business of the mechanization of the classroom, the cause of cultural democracy finds itself in a curious handshake with cost-cutting technology. The promise is to sell fewer and better products to more consumers, and to make large profits for a small number of companies. Well, America is already a business civilization. Do we want to make education itself more like a business?

A word about the physical classroom. I'm going to suppose that everyone who reads this has taken a course in a physical classroom that turned out to be good and memorable. Also, that we've all had courses that were disappointing because they were ill-conceived or badly taught, or because we chose wrong. Can one describe what it's like to be in a classroom that is working well? It isn't like any other conversation or any other human encounter. When you listen to the exchange of well-formulated thoughts in a discussion of a complex work of art or thought—a human document concerning human actions—you learn a good deal that can't be quantified, packaged, or transmitted by an efficient impersonal medium, no matter how up-to-date, no matter how well engineered. The expression on the face of someone making an unexpected point with considerable urgency reads differently in the presence of that person

than it would if the person were a face on a screen that you might or might not look at.

There is also the look, well known to teachers, of the participant who is almost ready to say something interesting or surprising. You learn to notice that look in a classroom. It is harder to see on a screen. Again, say that in a complicated discussion a speaker's sentence trails off midway—a common thing in the sort of intellectual discipline I'm talking about. Sometimes it indicates a half-baked idea that is well lost. At other times it may mark the beginning of a perception that ought to be encouraged and followed up.

Every student and teacher knows the sort of signal I'm talking about. In fact, you don't see it only or mainly in classrooms. It can happen in any conversation that pursues a serious thought or perception; things suddenly get intense and you can't be sure how. Does it occur in exactly the same way, and with the same intimacy and intensity, in a group cell-phone conversation or Skype interview? Though some people will say the phone or the screen is just as good or almost as good, I suspect more of us drift with that answer without really believing it. We go along not from instinct or inclination but because this seems the inevitable direction of progress. And if we don't go with the flow of progress, we will be called—what exactly? Perhaps we will be called Luddites.

Who were the Luddites? They were so named, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, because in

their violent attacks on the emerging system of industrial capitalism, they traced their loyalty to King Ludd, a legendary friend of the people, rather than to King George III. The Luddites adopted a consistent tactic: they attempted to degrade or destroy the new technology that was degrading and destroying their lives. Thus they broke the frames of power-driven looms that were rendering the manufacture of textile products ever more efficient and cheaper and often uglier. For the new factory system had another effect besides convenience and efficiency in the production of goods; and as it happens, this was an effect we can still see all around. The new system split up families. It did so because the products of cottage industry, admirable though they might be for the artisanal virtues, could no longer compete with the factory goods. So parents and children went to work in the factories—often in separate factories miles apart—while the unlucky were left without any work at all. Part of the story of this economic catastrophe was told by Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation*.

As Polanyi suggested in that book of 1944, and as we can now confirm, the process of displacement has never altogether stopped. It offers a model of progress by which a few greatly prosper, many are put out of work and stranded at the margins of society, the general quality of life grows better by some criteria and worse by others, and the distances between people grow longer and harder to cross. The Luddites were reckless, no doubt, but the harm they inflicted can hardly be compared to the irreparable damage done to generations of children working in factories. Nor can we compare the destruction of the social environment wrought by the Luddites to the destruction of the natural environment achieved by coal-mining in the twentieth century and promised by fracking in the twenty-first—both of them technologies necessary for progress, or so we are told.

The utilitarian dream of the MOOC education in some ways suggests the opposite of the catastrophe of displacement that I described by analogy with the early factory system. After all, nobody will be driven from home by taking organic chemistry taught online by a teacher who spoke the words many months earlier in front of a camera thousands of miles away. You can take a course like that at home. That is precisely its attraction. No: under this new regime of teaching and learning, the displacement would not occur at home but in the workplace of education. Teachers stand to lose their jobs to the teaching programs supplied by the experts. The losses, for the most part, won't be felt by scholars at the large and prestigious universities and the better-known liberal arts colleges, but at less well known colleges and institutions throughout the literate world.

It would be a sign of humility regarding the educational inheritance if some of the MOOC outfits pledged *not* to market their products to schools that already employ teachers in the subjects covered by an online course. Schools that don't have teachers of the relevant subjects and don't have a reasonable chance of hiring them are a different matter. So are corporations that want to teach their employees a skill that is methodical and formulaic. Nor should one deny the benefit that online courses bring to freelance students of all ages who would never be able to find instruction of a similar kind anywhere in their neighborhood. A virtual course is better than no course; and who will pretend that the disadvantages of online instruction aren't outweighed by the good of having a shot at learning where none existed before? It is the next step of the pitch that ought to trouble us.

The authoritative MOOC on any subject aspires to be accepted as a uniform convenience. And yet, we lose something when we shut out the human contact whose elimination makes for the convenience. Might it not turn out to be antiseptic—deadening, even—to complete a two-year or a four-year-long succession of educational requirements in the frictionless setting of the virtual classroom? And if we think of uniformity as a gain—millions of pupils imbibing a familiar doctrine from the same learned authority—what shall we say of the consequent loss of variety? Good teaching has more than one master, one method, and one style.

In the age of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, it is not a foregone conclusion that our society will continue to support teaching at all levels as one of the honorable professions, a respected calling on a par with medicine and law. The support will continue only if—against the allure of the most seductive of technologies—we remind ourselves how much the contact between teacher and student can matter in the physical classroom. I can't see what is risked by this conservative approach. Without embracing online education, we can still choose to take the help it offers.

Let us use it and not let it use us. Given the choice, who would watch on their laptop a discussion of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* or Joyce's *Ulysses*, or the films of Keaton or Chaplin shrunk to the knucklebreadth of a smart phone? Or suppose (as is sure to happen) online psychotherapy is marketed soon for persons suffering from anxiety or depression. Will it be quite the same without the actual person in the actual room? If our intuitions tell us that something is missed in such encounters, if the online therapist, like the online professor, fails to capture a certain human dimension, we ought to ask what else is missing from the picture of progress that we are being urged to follow simply because it calls itself by the name of progress. □

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# The High Publishing Life

Ann Kjellberg

## Muse

by Jonathan Galassi.  
Knopf, 257 pp., \$25.00

Jonathan Galassi's new novel, *Muse*, is built around a charming, if unlikely, premise: that an important American poet could become as famous as a pop star or a screen siren or an athlete. His heroine, Ida Perkins, created a sensation at age eighteen as a Bryn Mawr undergraduate with her first book of poems, *Virgin Again* (1949), and to the end of her days not only was admired by a coterie of editors, professors, bookstore clerks, and fellow writers but also appeared on *Charlie Rose* and *Dick Cavett*, modeled for a Blackglama ad ("What becomes a legend most?"), visited Eldridge Cleaver in Watts, dined with Babe Paley and Truman Capote at La Côte Basque, had her picture taken between "sunburned, shirtless Allen Ginsberg and Robert Lowell" in Maine by Elizabeth Hardwick, and had a highway named after her.

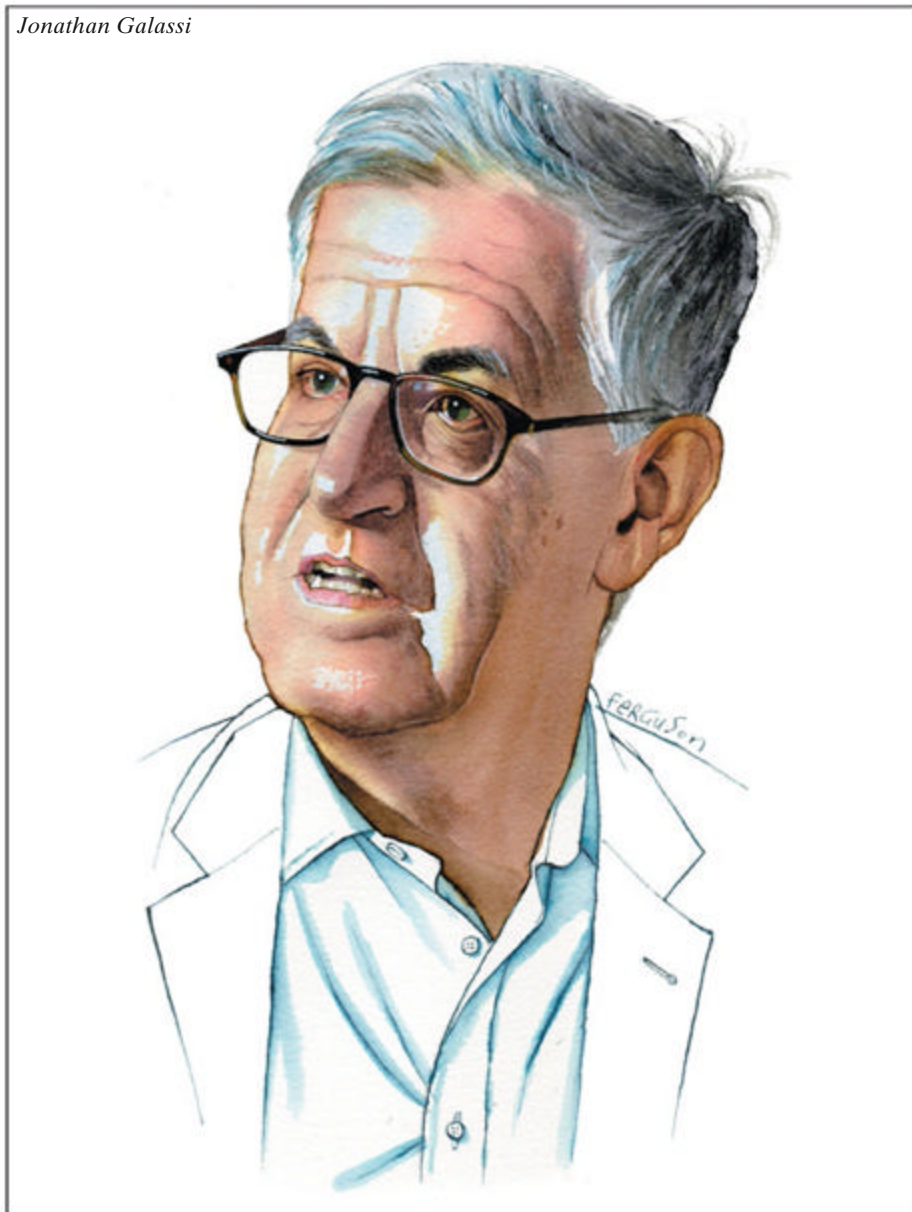
After her death, its anniversary, which was also her birthday, was made a national holiday by President Obama, who invited her circle to the White House to hear her poems read by Oprah Winfrey. Thanks to Ida, Galassi writes, poetry "found itself at the heart of American culture and society"; Ida "made poetry fans out of ordinary women and men."

Here we are in the midst of fantasy, but a fantasy not far, as Galassi's novel eloquently illustrates, from the one inhabited by people in the literature business. The main character of *Muse* is a self-effacing, nearly shlumpy editor named Paul Dukach who has fulfilled a dream harbored since his youth shelving books in a small-town bookstore to be an editor at the distinguished literary house of Purcell & Stern. He conceived this dream around the time he discovered the enthralling work of Ida Perkins, who is published by P&S's scrappier yet, in some senses, more exalted rival, Impetus Press. The central place that Ida's work occupies in his heart echoes his boss's yearning to secure her as the most sought-after prize for his writerly stable. A world in which Ida Perkins appears on *Dick Cavett* might be remote to the average American, but it is not incommensurate with her status for editors at P&S and Impetus.

Galassi is well situated to document the manners of this particular subculture. He joined Farrar, Straus and Giroux (where the present reviewer was once employed and remains somewhat entangled) as the protégé of its founder, Roger Straus Jr., in 1986 and has run it himself since Straus's death in 2004. Straus was a larger-than-life figure and reappears in *Muse* as Homer Stern, P&S's founder and archimagos.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Readers interested in decoding the relevant personalities might consult Boris Kachka's recent history, *Hothouse: The Art of Survival and the Survival of Art at America's Most Celebrated Publishing House, Farrar, Straus & Giroux* (Simon and Schuster, 2013), reviewed in these pages by another of the period's titans, Random House's Jason Epstein, September 26, 2013.

Jonathan Galassi



Galassi renders the internal milieu of the old FSG with tender exactitude. Many of its minor characters are immediately recognizable. Roger Straus in particular is observed in all his magnificent plumage: profane, hilarious, high-minded, spontaneous, petty, formidable. Of Ida Perkins's publisher, Sterling Wainwright, he moans, "God, I wish he'd roll over so I could put my hand on Ida Perkins's thigh"; of an imperious agent and a bit of a gossip, he says, "When Nympho finds out, she'll have a vaginal collapse."

But Paul, whose quiet and unsuccessful pursuit of happiness with other men seems to have gone unnoticed by his mentor ("'Davidoff is a faggot,' he'd assert, more or less out of thin air"), never loses his sympathetic regard for his boss. Of Stern's aggressive sexualizing Paul observes astutely, "Sexual activity for Homer was an index of moral fallibility and vitality at one and the same time." More than the biographers and journalists, Galassi registers the extent to which such "colorful" behavior can be cruel and destructive at close range, even as it powers a certain mythological potency.

As the unfolding drama of *Muse* makes clear, the fate of these publishing houses is of more than local interest. Homer and his counterpart and rival, Sterling Wainwright, were among the last and most important independent publishers of an era in which large personalities, dedicated to books and writers, shaped what was published and read in America. *Muse* chronicles the passing of that era into one in which

popularity and commercial success threaten to be predicted by algorithm.

Paul Dukach, in his love for reading and his ardor for the art of publishing, finds himself drawn to Homer's competitor, the elegant and cerebral Sterling Wainwright. Wainwright is plainly based on New Directions' James Laughlin, of whom Galassi was a close friend and FSG recently published a capacious biography.<sup>2</sup> Wainwright is the publisher and cousin and sometime lover of Ida Perkins, but also, as the founder of Impetus Press, the source of several waves of the European and American avant-garde writing that have had their effect on American letters. Describing a shelf in Wainwright's barn, Paul exults: "Everyone from Tagore to Blaisdell, early Luteri to late Broch, Robert Duncan to Dermot Weems to César Vallejo to Pélieu to Serengetti—it was a checkerboard of world literature, mind-boggling in its depth and adventurousness and originality." (It is one of the pleasures of *Muse* to watch Galassi mix his fictional literati with the real ones. The fictional Bishop, Pound, and Sontag—and even Straus and Laughlin—bump up against their real-life counterparts. The novel's next-to-last page refers to an imaginary posthumous compilation of Ida's ephemera

<sup>2</sup>Ian S. MacNiven, "Literchoor Is My Beat": A Life of James Laughlin, *Publisher of New Directions* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014); reviewed in these pages by Charles Simic, April 2, 2015.

edited by Eliot Weinberger—a contributor to these pages—in 2021.)

Where Homer is Jewish, mercantile, pugnacious, Sterling is WASP, entitled, leisurely. Homer leaves the office only to go to the Frankfurt Book Fair (and rest up afterward in Paris and London); Sterling winters in his bespoke Wyoming ski resort and works, when he does, out of a rustic family compound upstate. Homer's authors are paid little; Sterling's less. Homer's list has plenty of Nobel laureates, but Sterling's has, over the years, consistently met the standards of a more selective avant-garde readership. It's a fine distinction but very visible to them both.

*Muse* spends much time describing the two publishers before it starts to tell Paul's story. Anyone with an interest in how literary publishing has conducted itself over the last several decades will read these passages with fascination. There are moments of rare candor about the editorial mind. Galassi writes of one of P&S's prize writers, for example:

What [she] really loved was sitting at the long table in Paul's office and going over her manuscript with him, word by word. She radiated joy at his undivided but critical attention, and Paul himself never felt more wanted or appreciated than during their chaste love fests. The fact that she could walk past him in the square the next day without recognizing him hardly mattered.

Or, "Paul had learned over time that most publishers were haunted by the Ones That Got Away—usually thanks to their own blindness or chintziness or lack of nerve. They seemed to matter more than the ones they'd managed to snare." Galassi describes the shark-like machinations of editors and publishers at the Frankfurt Book Fair: "The pros among these gentlemanly thieves understood each other perfectly: where amity ended and commerce held sway; where commerce took a backseat and long loyalty asserted its claims." He praises the hardy members of the house sales force:

Old-timers who at heart were as devoted to good books as anyone in the office, if not more so, but who had to make a buck, as did Homer and Co.—though the editors often seemed unaware that this was a fundamental aspect of their work.

Among the deepest themes of this book are the entanglements of love, judgment, business, art, narcissism, craft, and power in which this dying ecosystem was once suspended.

Although the staff and internal structure and ecology of the publishing house are rendered with great precision, the writers themselves, the center of the whole operation, are deliberately smudged. The troika that Galassi refers to as the Three Aces, Homer's three Nobel laureate poets, in real life the Russian Joseph Brodsky, the Irish Seamus Heaney, and the St. Lucian Derek Walcott, become the Georgian Dmitry Chavchavadze, the South African St. John Vezey, and the loosely Caribbean Granada Brooks. Another FSG



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troika, Bernard Malamud, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Philip Roth, appear as the “leading Jewish American novelists of the late sixties, Abe Burack, Byron Hummock, and Jonathan Targoff.” Reigning above these figures is Pepita Erskine, Galassi’s version of Susan Sontag, who has been recast as a “taboo-smashing fire-brand African American critic and novelist.”

The Jewish writers don’t get much attention; the Three Aces largely appear as clichés, perhaps because their presence as poets would interfere with the primacy of Ida Perkins; but the Pepita Erskine character has her own presence. Like Sontag, she rose from obscurity, began as a scourge of authority, and became a spokeswoman for a provocative version of high culture. Galassi writes:

It was Pepita’s voice—insolent, belabored with Germanic Seriousness, lightened and enlivened by a dash of jive, and insistent on its own unimpeachability—that had become the hallmark of the P&S style. At a critical point in its history, Pepita’s intellectual reach and tropism for controversy had lent the house an aura of urgent cultural significance that it had never lost.

And he goes on to describe Pepita’s quasi-sexual, but nevertheless finally “transactional” relationship with Homer.

Another smudge in the story involves timing. The two Troikas—the three Jewish patriarchs and the three international Nobel laureate poets—and the primacy of Sontag were phenomena of

the 1980s and early 1990s, well before the ascent of Amazon and e-books and social networking, but roughly synchronous with Galassi’s arrival at FSG and youth as an editor. By 1999, half of them had died. But the main events of the novel unfold between 2006 and 2011. *Muse* occupies a somewhat hypothetical space in which the strong intellectual presences of the pre-Internet world are still with us, but digitization and its consequences are already being felt. The intellectual circles around Ida likewise reach back through the century: her contemporary friends and rivals and lovers—most notably her Poundesque lover, A.O.—often have as prototypes writers a generation or two older. Her social and intellectual world is, as Galassi puts it, “modern in the old-fashioned sense”; it has patina.

Homer has been trying to secure Ida as a writer for years, and Paul has been subject to a powerful semierotic, semi-maternal attraction to her and her work for most of his life. The opportunity arrives for both of them as a friendship develops between Paul and Ida’s publisher, Sterling Wainwright, notwithstanding their professional rivalry. First Sterling, noting Paul’s impressive command of Ida’s work, invites him to try to decipher the enigmatic last notebooks of A.O. This leads Paul to Venice, where Ida has managed, in spite of her great fame, to live in seclusion for several decades.

Paul finds the now eighty-year-old Ida, though frail and subdued, every bit the galvanizing presence he had always expected, and she responds to

his rapt and respectful attention by confiding in him and, in the end, surprising him with the gift of her last manuscript, with instructions to publish it after her death. With this she dismisses him and, a few weeks later, dies, leaving Paul with a quandary. He has of course rushed back to his hotel to read the book, which he finds not only a breakthrough work of contemporary verse but an explosive coda to a legendary life. In it she divulges that she has had a decades-long affair with the late wife of none other than Sterling Wainwright. Handing such a book to the emissary of Sterling’s rival is thus a double betrayal, but Paul brings off its publication with the consummate editorial finesse we would expect of him, capping his own editorial career and that of his boss, and even helping out a few minor characters.

Getting the book, this particular book, is what has kept Galassi’s novel in motion—the writer everyone wants, who is beloved, who sells in the hundreds of thousands of copies, who shapes the literature as she moves hearts, who makes an art everyone fears is in decline sexy and irresistible and central, who achieves fame without courting it, who bestows on editors the feeling of acceptance and inclusion in the higher circles of art. As Paul worries late in the book over “content provision” and some of the more advanced digital forms, it is the departure of this person and her kind that he laments, the living breathing being who miraculously makes art—her own, inevitably specific, uniquely personal art—possible. Of the Jeff Bezos character he is hobnobbing with, he realizes that however many books he may have on his nightstand, “if he couldn’t get one kind of content he’d find something else.” It is a special gift to Paul that the book Ida left him has at its core her secret affirmation of love for a person of one’s own sex, in a world where they had both been bullied by heterosexual expectations.

In the end, though, the novel shares with Paul a central, aching absence. The actual act of literary creation itself, and literary experience, remain somehow offstage. Most of the writers depicted are comical, narcissistic oafs when they are visible at all, and rarely do we glimpse any creative work as it is “sweated out in anguish and solitude,” as Paul disconcertingly recalls it must be while moving about on the trading floor at Frankfurt. The novel is even a little unsure how to describe it. The words “talent” and “gift” appear a lot. Work “makes a difference” or “has an... impact.”

But what new vistas of human experience or understanding the artist might be reaching for, or how that might be done, or what might be the human costs of the effort, is not really within this novel’s purview. Only Ida seems to carry this understanding as a kind of cloaked secret, in her reluctance

to write letters or expose herself or feed the machine of her fame. When she finally confides in Paul in Venice, she tells him about her lovers, not her work of creation, her life as a poet; that central reality remains shielded within her.

Galassi courageously offers up some of her work for our scrutiny, especially, in the end, large swaths of her triumphant final book. The enormous claims he makes for it might seem a poison pill—it is after all part of the point that we precisely do not live in a society that produces major poets who are also enormous popular successes; the author who proposes to write examples of such poetry sets himself a high bar. But the work he gives Ida doesn’t strain to impress; it is strikingly charming and direct. She writes in very short, clean lines, with informal occasional rhymes that echo the “modern in the old-fashioned sense” style of, say, Louis MacNeice, while also sounding very fresh and contemporary:

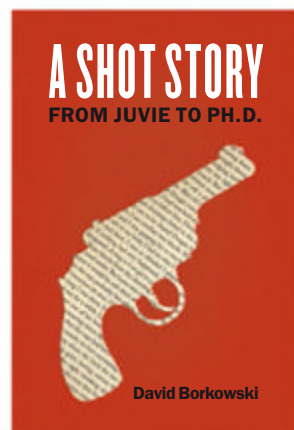
*I waited  
in the sun all afternoon  
I waited  
on the dock  
till it was cold*

*And when I raised my head up  
I was old*

That Galassi gives us such direct and personal poetry as an example of what a popular, serious poet might sound like leads us back to the question, who is Ida? There is certainly no historical American poet her character might suggest. Ida also has some echoes of Sontag: the early fame, the notorious beauty, the independence, the embrace of sensuality in art while avoiding personal disclosure, even the posthumously revealed polyamorous attachments. But Galassi’s Ida is in other respects very much her own woman. Her art is inward-looking and meditative and not at all like the socially involved Sontag.

Galassi dedicates the book to her memory, suggesting perhaps some personal human prototype. But I suspect that Ida is less a specific person than the idea of what a writer meant to those who were committed to literary life, as Paul and Galassi are. Her first name contains a hypothetical (I would have), and Paul says at one point of the literary figures he admires, “What he valued most was their all-or-nothing faith in themselves—something he wished he had more of.” It’s not just the literary gift—it’s also the impulse to embrace and surrender to it that stirs Paul. It’s this magic knot of art and character that he fears may be loosening in today’s reading life, and that he yearns to hold tight; such longing for a vanishing métier and its muse forms the novel’s love story, and the love story of the world it affectionately eulogizes. □

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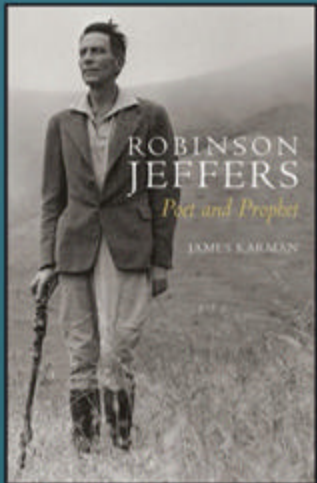
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## Summer Schedule

The next issue of **The New York Review**, dated August 13, will go on sale July 30. The following issue, dated September 24, will go on sale September 10. Subscribers should receive their issues approximately one week before the on-sale date.





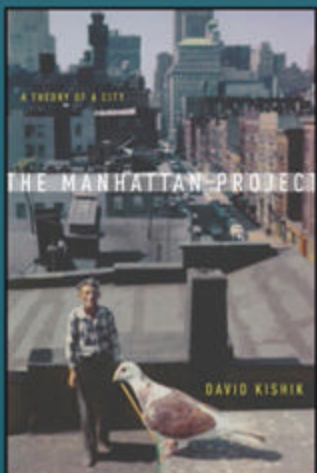
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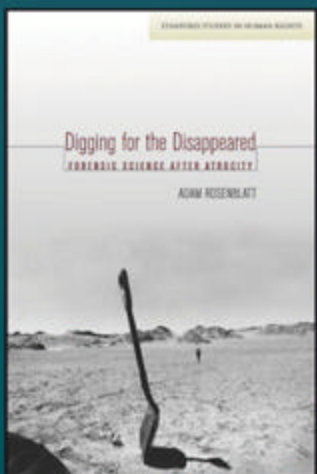
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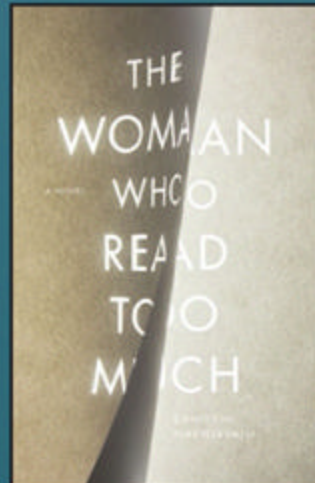
*Forensic Science after Atrocity*

ADAM ROSENBLATT

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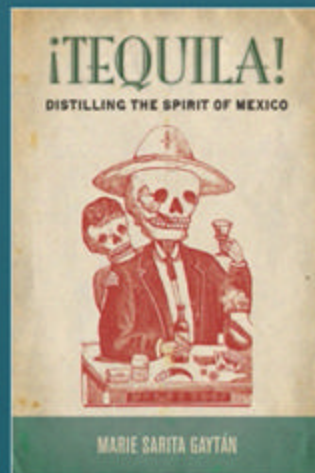
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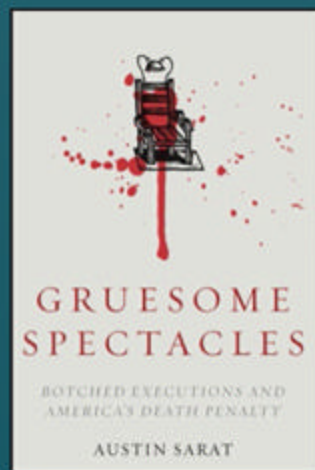
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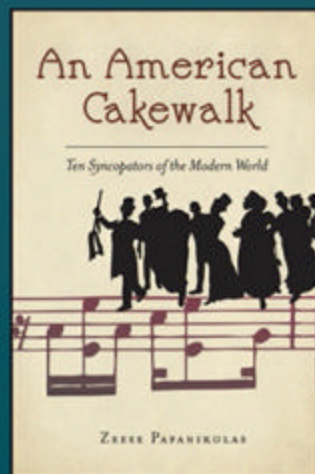
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*Botched Executions and America's Death Penalty*

AUSTIN SARAT

"How enviable a quiet death by lethal injection," wrote Justice Scalia, in a concurring opinion that denied review of a Texas death penalty case. But is it quiet? Renewed and vigorous debate over the death penalty has erupted as DNA testing has proven that many on death row are in fact innocent. In this debate, however, the guilty have been forgotten. In his new book, *Gruesome Spectacles: Botched Executions and America's Death Penalty*, renowned legal scholar Austin Sarat describes just how unquiet death by execution can be.

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# The Rule of Boko Haram

Joshua Hammer

**Boko Haram:**  
**Inside Nigeria's Unholy War**  
by Mike Smith.  
I. B. Tauris, 233 pp., \$29.00

In early May, during the final days of the hot, dry season, I flew to Yola, the capital of Adamawa State in eastern Nigeria and an apparent safe haven from the Boko Haram insurgency. Over the past year, the radical Islamic fighters had taken over large swaths of territory in three northeastern Nigerian states, killing thousands, conscripting many young men, and kidnapping and raping young women and girls. But after a series of defeats at the hands of the insurgents, the Nigerian army had begun pushing them back. It had just liberated hundreds of women and children from captivity in the Sambisa Forest, a 23,000-square-mile reserve of savannah and near-impenetrable bush in neighboring Borno State, where many of the Boko Haram fighters had taken refuge. The army had trucked 275 freed hostages to a displaced persons' camp—an abandoned training school for nomads—on the outskirts of Yola.

John Medugu, a social worker, led me through a yellow-concrete classroom building and into a shadeless courtyard. Dozens of women, children, and babies sat in the 100-degree heat, eating boiled yams for breakfast. Most of the children looked malnourished. The captives had endured harsh conditions in the bush, huddled beneath shade trees to escape the fierce sun, eating at best two meager meals of corn or watery bean soup a day, sleeping on the ground, forced to walk through the night to stay one step ahead of the Nigerian army.

During these marches, they had sometimes gone twenty-four hours without food or water. Christian women who had agreed to convert to Islam, as well as those who married Boko Haram fighters, had received preferential treatment from their captors. The fighters appeared to have used systematic rape as a means of controlling and humiliating their captives. They also, Medugu said, want to ensure the rise of another generation of Islamic jihadists. Thirty of the roughly ninety women aged eighteen and older, he told me, were pregnant.

One twenty-six-year-old woman I talked to came from a village near Chibok, the site of the girls' secondary school from which 276 students had been abducted by Boko Haram a year before—one of the group's most notorious crimes. (None of the Chibok girls was among those who had been rescued.) Her husband had disappeared during the Boko Haram attack on her village in April 2014, she told me, and she had been taken to the forest with her two children, ten and seven years old. When Nigerian troops had overrun the camp at eleven o'clock in the morning five days earlier, they started shooting at the retreating terrorists, and several women had been struck by bullets and died on the spot. Armored vehicles had crushed others to death. The insurgents had carried off both of her children. "They are worthless people,"

she told me. "They have no humanity." Like almost all of the former captives, she was participating in a daily therapy session to deal with the trauma of repeated rape.

"I met one sixteen-year-old girl who was threatening to remove her own fetus," John Medugu told me. "We keep her under close observation. When she delivers, we will take away the child, otherwise she will kill it."

The country known as Nigeria began to coalesce at the beginning of the



Children who escaped Boko Haram attacks in Michika and Cameroon, Adamawa State, Nigeria, January 2015

twentieth century, when Frederick Lugard, a British mercenary and explorer, forced the Sokoto Caliphate and Islamic emirs across the Sahel of West Africa to submit to British rule. On New Year's Day 1914, Lugard formally joined together that protectorate in the Muslim north, dominated by Hausa and Fulani pastoralists, and another protectorate created from the wetlands around Lagos and the Niger Delta and largely populated by Christian Yorubas and Igbos. Four decades later, prospectors struck oil in the Niger Delta, starting a torrent of wealth that many believed would help resolve Nigeria's deep internal divisions and turn the country, which gained its independence from Great Britain in 1960, into a global power.

Today Nigeria, with a population of some 174 million people, is the world's tenth-largest oil producer, pumping 2.4 million barrels a day, and has the highest gross national product in Africa. But the riches have brought neither stability nor prosperity. A series of military dictatorships siphoned off billions of dollars of oil revenue over Nigeria's first four decades, creating a culture of corruption that permeated society.

The civilians who have ruled Nigeria since 1999 have proven no more honest. Transparency International last year ranked Nigeria as the thirty-ninth most corrupt country in the world. Criminal gangs, some with ties to powerful politicians, smuggle out \$1 billion worth of oil each year. Last year, Lamido Sanusi, then the head of Nigeria's Central Bank, accused the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation—the agency that buys, sells, regulates, and produces

the country's oil—of diverting \$18.5 billion in oil revenues in a single year, between 2012 and 2013. "It's just a big scam," Sanusi said. "The amount is shared by a cabal." Weeks later, Sanusi was fired, setting off protests across Nigeria. By some estimates, the country's leaders have stolen \$400 billion worth of oil wealth since independence.

As the political and military elite enriches itself, the average Nigerian has grown poorer. Most of Nigeria's population survives on one dollar or less a day. The desperate scramble for resources has bred a culture of violence,

the Chad border. Smith describes how, around 2002, Yusuf, who espoused a stridently fundamentalist Islam, began attracting followers to "a makeshift set-up outside his home," later constructing his own mosque in a neighborhood of Maiduguri called Railway Quarters. Yusuf argued that Western institutions and ideas are *haram*—forbidden under Islamic law—and called on Muslims to reject the legitimacy of the Nigerian state and to regard science, modern literature, and other secular teachings as apostasy. He singled out Borno State's governor, a repressive and corrupt politician, as a symbol of all that was wrong with Western education. "Yusuf's message resonated with those who didn't go to school," Kyari Mohammed, a university professor in Yola and an expert on Boko Haram, told me. "Going to school means taking a government job, and then tomorrow you become stinking rich."

Yusuf did not publicly advocate violence, but his followers were stockpiling weapons. This was easy to do in northern Nigeria, with its corrupt army and police as well as porous borders. In 2008, security forces under both state and federal control began harassing and arresting Yusuf's followers for minor transgressions, such as disobeying a law mandating wearing helmets on motorbikes. After an escalating series of skirmishes, the army, joined by members of the notoriously brutal Mobile Police, attacked Yusuf's headquarters in Maiduguri. Fighting spilled into the streets, and hundreds of people, both Boko Haram and security men, were killed during several days of gun battles. Smith writes:

Yusuf had by then become something of a folk hero to his followers and a marked man for the security forces. He was 39 and had been repeatedly arrested, but always found himself later released, welcomed back to his neighborhood in Maiduguri by adoring crowds. Some described him as a reluctant fighter, content to build his movement by preaching the evils of Western influence, condemning evolution and denying that the Earth is a sphere.

After this battle, the army captured Yusuf and turned him over to the Mobile Police, who executed him on the spot. He had named as his successor Abubakar Shekau, a fiery preacher who served as the group's "chief of doctrine" and who was regarded as even more extreme than Yusuf. "He was known for getting emotional, for shedding tears while preaching," Kyari Mohammed told me. Shekau spent one year lying low—there are reports that he was recuperating from a gunshot wound received during the fighting in Maiduguri—and then reemerged in September 2010. Fighters broke down the gate of the main prison in Bauchi, the capital of northern Nigeria's Bauchi State, freeing hundreds of Yusuf's followers. By then the group of militants had become known as Boko Haram, Smith writes,

not necessarily by its members, but by local residents and the





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–Montreal Review of Books



news media who picked up on the idea that its leader was opposed to Western education. The most commonly accepted translation of the Hausa-language phrase is “Western education is forbidden,” though it can have wider meanings as well. The group would eventually refer to itself as Jama’atu Ahlus Sunnah Lid Da’awati Wal Jihad, or People Committed to the Prophet’s Teachings for Propagation and Jihad.

Nigerian President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua, a northern Muslim, died unexpectedly of a heart ailment in May 2010. Goodluck Jonathan, his vice-president, a Christian from Bayelsa State in the Niger Delta, succeeded him. He ran for the office the next year against Muhammadu Buhari, a former military dictator from the north. Jonathan, observes Smith, represented a break from the past:

He seemed to inspire a certain amount of hope—somewhat ironically given his sleepy persona. His unlikely rise and calm demeanor led to the impression that he may be different from the country’s dominant politicians who had robbed Nigeria of so much of its wealth over the years. His campaign managers...sought to capitalize on it, using Jonathan’s Facebook page to announce his candidacy and emphasizing his family’s humble roots. Despite his sometimes fumbling speech...there was a feeling among many in the country that Nigeria had tried strongmen, military men and slick dealmakers, only to be left disappointed. Perhaps it was time for something else.

Jonathan defeated Buhari decisively, with nearly two thirds of the vote. Two months later, on June 16, 2011, a thirty-five-year-old disciple of Abubakar Shekau drove a bomb-laden car into police headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria’s capital, killing two people in addition to himself. It was Boko Haram’s first suicide bombing, and a declaration of war against the Nigerian state by Shekau and his followers, who numbered about three thousand at the time. A bomber struck the United Nations headquarters in Abuja in August 2011, killing twenty-one. Boko Haram’s violence escalated. The group attacked police stations and military barracks, and bombed churches, mosques, and bus stations.

Shekau exercised nominal control over his fighters, but local commanders were given great latitude, Nigerian military experts told me, to choose their targets. Soon, they singled out villages whose residents were seen as sympathetic to the Nigerian army or government, slaughtering thousands of men, women, and children. In 2013 local vigilantes and the army expelled Boko Haram from its main base in Maiduguri. Around this time, local journalists told me, the insurgents began kidnapping girls and women, apparently to replace wives and girlfriends whom they had been forced to leave in the city.

Jonathan seemed to ignore the violence. His advisers sought to persuade him that the killings were a plot orga-

nized by aggrieved northern politicians to embarrass him, government and diplomatic sources in Abuja told me, and they argued that the terror in the northeast posed no threat to the rest of the country.

Jonathan had little rapport with the military elite, many of whom were northern Muslims. “Jonathan was afraid of his generals,” a government source told me. “I don’t think he could call his generals and say ‘get up and move.’” As a result, I was told by Hamza Idris, a correspondent for the *Daily Trust* newspaper, based in Maiduguri, who has reported on Boko Haram from its beginnings, “a small militia group was so emboldened that it believed that it could attack anybody.”

Shortly before midnight on April 14, 2014, hundreds of female students were

ern Nigeria. Government troops abandoned one base after another, allowing stockpiles of weapons and armored vehicles to fall into the insurgents’ hands. The “religious zeal” of the jihadists, the journalist Hamza Idris told me, contrasted with the lack of motivation and demoralization of the average Nigerian army conscript. Dispatched to the front lines with a handful of bullets in their rifles, the troops were well aware that their families would receive little or no support from the state should they be killed in battle. “You see hundreds of wives and children of deceased soldiers begging in Maiduguri,” Idris said. “They were tossed out of the barracks, forced to live with the relatives of their husbands.”

One Nigerian sergeant admitted to me that he had fled his base in Mubi, a trading center of 300,000 people in

ceived weapons, money, or fighters from the larger group, but diplomatic sources told me that monitoring cross-border movements of money and arms in western Africa is difficult, and some sharing of resources could be taking place.

During the period before the 2015 vote, Jonathan finally began to take action against Boko Haram. He replaced the incompetent commander of the Nigerian army’s Seventh Division, responsible for security in the northeast, and provided his troops with better weapons. Tanks and anti-aircraft guns arrived from Ukraine, Pakistan, and other suppliers. The US government stepped up its drone surveillance and shared intelligence. In January 2015 the government hired a group of South African mercenaries, who provided combat helicopters and pilots and trained a Nigerian army strike group.

The next month, the governments of Chad, Niger, and Cameroon formed a military coalition with Nigeria to take on the insurgents. Boko Haram fighters had mounted cross-border attacks with increasing frequency, and the insurgency was driving thousands of Nigerian refugees across the frontiers. Under pressure from three foreign armies and a newly supplied Nigerian force, the rebels lost in six weeks most of the territory they had captured in 2014. “We’re in a situation now that nobody had predicted,” a Nigerian army officer in Yola told me, saying that most of the Boko Haram fighters were now pinned down inside the Sambisa Forest south of Maiduguri. “We have reduced the area they control dramatically.” The turnaround came too late to help Jonathan, who was defeated by Buhari in the election in March.



asleep in their dormitory rooms in a government boarding school in Chibok, a settlement in rural Borno State. The girls had gathered to take end-of-the-year examinations at the school, having been assured by the state and the military that they would receive protection. In fact, only a single security guard was on duty that night as several dozen armed men, some in military uniforms, overran the premises, herded 276 girls onto trucks, set fire to the school, and drove their hostages into the bush. Boko Haram had targeted schools before—two months earlier, the jihadists had shot and burned to death fifty-nine boys at a boarding school in Damaturu in Yobe State—but the abductions showed the government’s inability to protect its most vulnerable citizens.

Days later, Shekau released a rambling video in which he vowed to sell the women as slaves. “God instructed me to sell them, they are his properties and I will carry out his instructions,” he said. The abductions led to a social media campaign, led by a former Nigerian education minister, and supported by Michelle Obama, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai, and other prominent figures. But it had little effect on the army, which mounted a few halfhearted efforts to find the Chibok girls—while killing unarmed civilians who were perceived to be sympathetic to Boko Haram.

In late 2014, rebels advanced across Borno and Adamawa states in an effort to recreate a “caliphate” in northeast-

Adamawa State that fell in late October 2014, as soon as he heard firing in the distance. “We had just our rifles, and those people came with tanks and anti-aircraft guns,” said the soldier. He ran away with 120 other soldiers and almost the entire civilian population. The jihadists “were well organized.”

Buhari again challenged Jonathan in the 2015 presidential election. In the early 1980s, the dictator had led a draconian “war against indiscipline,” dispatching police to whip unruly commuters at bus stops and forcing civil servants who arrived late to work to perform frog jumps in their offices. The war against indiscipline had been carried to “sadistic levels, glorying in the humiliation of a people,” wrote the Nobel laureate for literature Wole Soyinka. This time Buhari cast himself as a born-again democrat, and his aura of authority appealed to a population that had grown weary of Jonathan’s fecklessness and a worsening war.

By this point Boko Haram had murdered more than 23,000 people. The group in early 2015 declared its allegiance to the Islamic State. “We announce to you the good news of the expansion of the caliphate to West Africa,” an Islamic State spokesman declared in response, “because the caliph...has accepted the allegiance of our brothers of the Sunni group for preaching and the jihad.” There is no indication that Boko Haram has re-

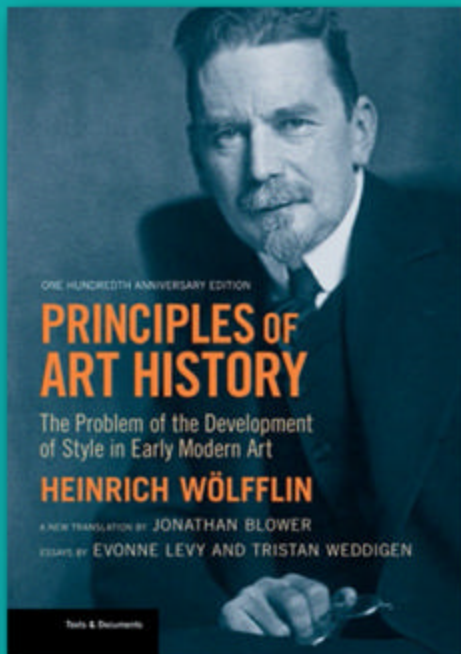
A few days after I arrived in northern Nigeria, the military invited me to observe its operations to clear Boko Haram from Adamawa State. Seven troops in a camouflage-painted pickup truck led the way out of Yola, a hard-scrabble city of 400,000 people. Two soldiers leaned out the back of the vehicle, swatting passersby with tree branches—an act of gratuitous violence that, I thought, summed up the contemptuous attitudes of the army, one of Africa’s most undisciplined and brutal forces.

A few days after my travel with the troops, Amnesty International released a damning report claiming that the army had “extrajudicially executed” more than 1,200 people, “arbitrarily arrested” at least 20,000, and committed “countless acts of torture” in its war against Boko Haram. At least seven thousand, the report alleged, had died in brutal conditions while under military detention. The organization claimed that these deaths “may amount to crimes against humanity” and held responsible nine top military officers including Alex Badeh, the chief of Nigeria’s defense staff. Nigeria’s military lashed out at the report in a news release, calling it “blackmail.”

We drove north through parched brown scrubland, studded with acacias and baobabs and bordered by black hills. After forty minutes, we reached Hong, the southernmost town held by Boko Haram before it was driven out a few months earlier by the army’s counteroffensive. Banks, administration buildings, and civil servants’ housing,



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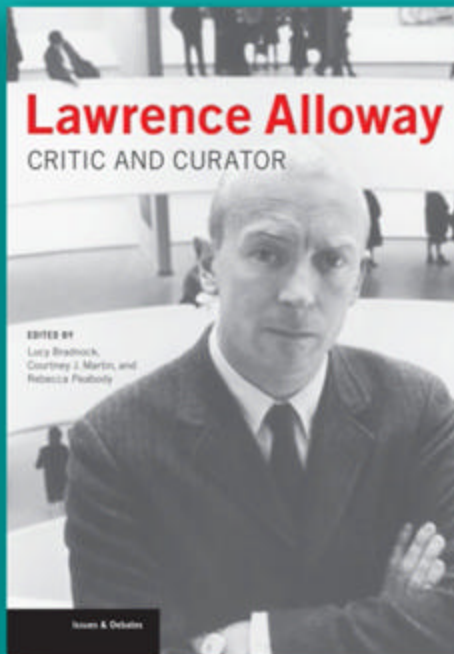
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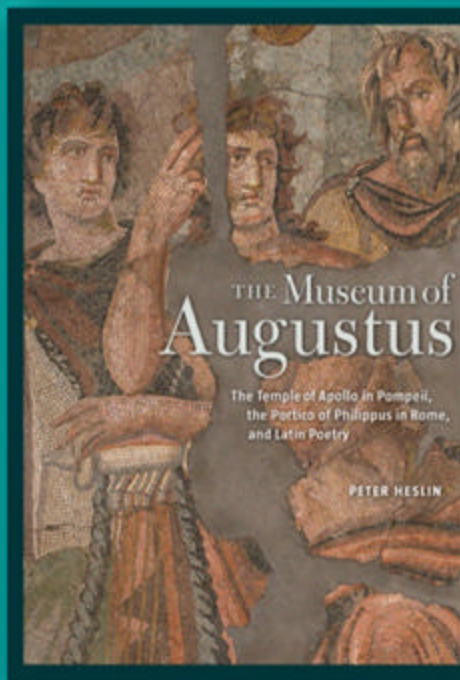
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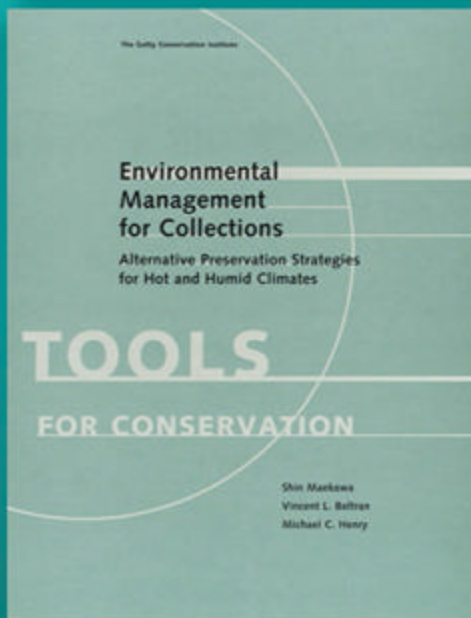
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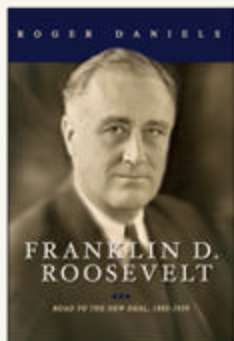
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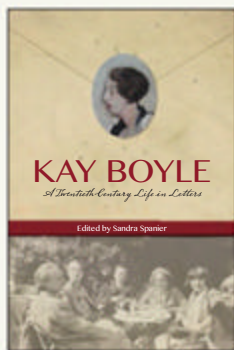
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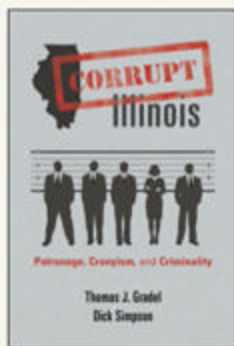
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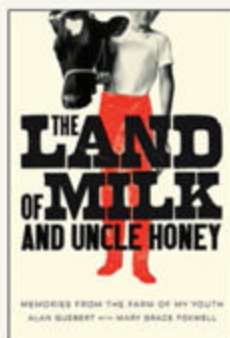
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symbols to the rebels of the hated Nigerian state, had been gutted and burned, as had a church. We passed the shells of Russian T-55 tanks that Boko Haram had captured from military bases and deployed in combat before the army disabled them. The jihadists had painted them over with slogans such as "There is no other God but Allah." All three bridges along our route had been destroyed, either dynamited by the rebels or bombed from the air by the army. Beside one collapsed bridge, local teenagers and young men were doing a brisk business pushing cars and trucks across a shallow river. "When the rains start and the river rises," Jacob Zambwa, a civil servant, told me, "we're going to be completely cut off." The state government, he said, had ignored their pleas for help.



Secretary of State John Kerry with Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari after his inauguration, Abuja, May 2015

After five hours we reached Michika, in northeast Adamawa State, at the limit of the Nigerian army's northward advance. People were starting to trickle back from displaced persons' camps in Yola, and they walked down the main road, on which they could see wrecked cars, abandoned government buildings, and, in front of one shop, the ashes of insurgents who had, I was told, been captured and burned alive. Boko Haram fighters were said to be lurking still in the surrounding bush and the Nigerian commander who escorted me warned me not to stray from the main road through town.

Walking along the road past a military checkpoint, I met a Hausa-speaking civil servant named Bitrus Buluma. He told me that jihadists had attacked his evangelical church in Michika during Sunday services in September 2014, shooting people indiscriminately. His wife had been killed as she tried to reach an exit. He had fled through the Mandara Mountains along the Cameroon border for days, and stayed with relatives in Yola. "I've returned because I can now see that there is military here, but I cannot say I feel entirely safe," said Buluma, who had gotten back the previous day. Just down the road, cries could be heard from the courtyard of a ruined health clinic. Soldiers had captured a Boko Haram straggler, and were interrogating him while beating him with a stick. In front of the headquarters of the region's armored brigade, two shirtless white mercenaries basked in the sun atop a tank. When I raised my iPhone to snap a photo, they waved me off and cocked their weapons.

Buhari took office at the end of May in a lavish inaugural ceremony in Abuja, attended by many foreign dignitaries, including US Secretary of State John Kerry. He has said that he will make the eradication of Boko Haram his priority. "Buhari will have much higher expectations of the military [than Jonathan], and he will be much tougher on the uniformed leadership," one Western official told me. Buhari pledged in his inaugural speech to crack down on military abuses even while raising pressure on the radical Islamists. "We shall overhaul the rules of engagement to avoid human rights violations in operations," he declared. "We shall improve operational and legal mechanisms so that disciplinary steps are taken against proven human right violations by the armed forces."

Hamza Idris, the correspondent in Maiduguri, was more optimistic than others I talked to. "These [northern] communities are his own, the people living there are his brothers. He has the experience, the determination, to contain the insurgency," he told me. "Very soon it will be difficult to hear anything more about Boko Haram."

But as Buhari prepared to settle into Aso Rock, the presidential palace in Abuja, Boko Haram was showing that it was not yet a spent force. Abubakar Shekau has taken refuge in the mountain range between Cameroon and Nigeria, where he is said to be directing his fighters by satellite phone. In mid-May, Boko Haram attacked Maiduguri for the third time in a year. The jihadists tried to overrun a military base there but retreated after hours of heavy fighting. Days later a young female suicide bomber killed seven people in Damaturu in Yobe State, and government officials said the insurgents had recaptured Marte, a town on the coast of Lake Chad in Borno State. In early June, two suicide bombers detonated themselves in the market in Yola, killing thirty people. It was the first time that Boko Haram had broken through the capital's security cordon since the insurgency began. The Chibok girls have still not been found. It is too early to tell whether the recent military successes will be followed by the final defeat of the jihadists. And even if the new regime does manage to eliminate most of them, the endemic poverty, corruption, and religious extremism that gave rise to the movement will prove a far more difficult challenge.



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# A Different Story of What Shaped America

Gordon S. Wood

## The Origins of American Religious Nationalism

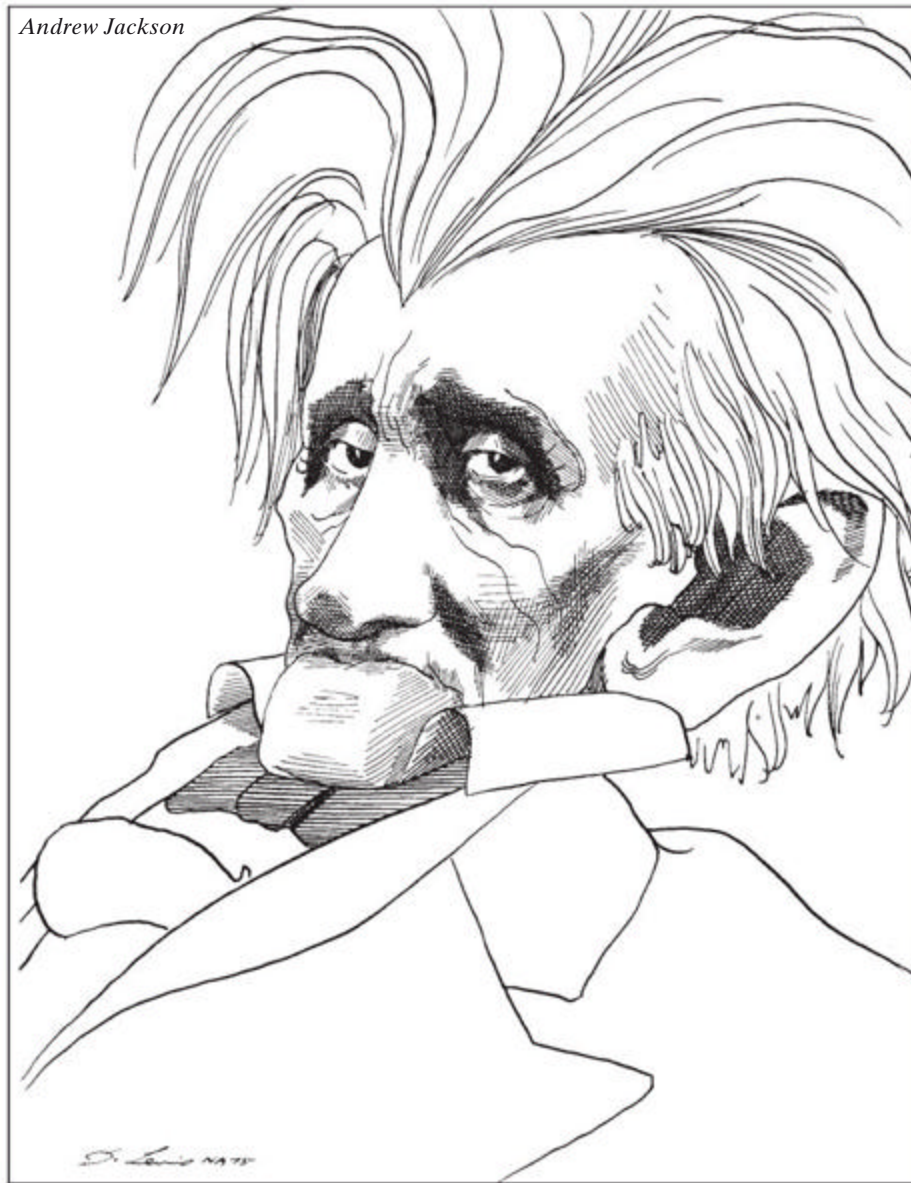
by Sam Haselby.  
Oxford University Press,  
336 pp., \$74.00

During the past six years or so Sam Haselby has taught history at both the University of Beirut and the University of Cairo. Perhaps the experience of teaching at these two Middle Eastern universities convinced him that religion tends to trump politics every time. For that is a major theme of his impressive and powerfully argued book—that in the decades following the American Revolution it was American Protestantism and not any sort of classical republicanism that was most important in shaping the development of American nationalism.

The break with Great Britain, says Haselby, who is currently a visiting professor at Columbia, freed Americans from the restraints imposed by British imperial considerations. In the half-century following the Declaration of Independence, tens of thousands of the rapidly growing population of Americans swarmed over the mountains into the trans-Appalachian West (the region west of the Appalachians and east of the Mississippi River). In 1790 the trans-Appalachian population was about a hundred thousand; by 1820 it had swelled to two and a quarter million. By 1821, nine new western states—Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana, Louisiana, Ohio, Illinois, Alabama, Mississippi, and Missouri—had entered the Union. By 1825, Kentucky and Tennessee alone had more people than Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Vermont combined. This extraordinary movement of people, Haselby says, “produced a new mode of nationalism, one more enduring than revolutionary-era civic republicanism, and more unruly.”

This western territory became the battleground of a momentous struggle over what kind of country the new United States would become. Would it emerge as a replica of the small, religiously conservative farming communities of New England? Or would it come to resemble the Jeffersonian society of the South, dominated by deistic-minded slaveholding planters? As it turned out neither the religiously conservative society of New England nor the secular Jeffersonian South came to dominate the West. Instead, the West experienced a struggle within Protestantism between what Haselby labels “frontier revivalism and national evangelism.”

By “frontier revivalism” Haselby means the religion of the migrants, mostly small farmers, who became members of the dynamic Protestant sects that dominated the frontier. And by “national evangelism” he means the northeastern elites, mostly gentry and capitalists, who organized the nationalist Protestant missions program that sought to save the West from the barbarism of the revivalists. The religious conflict between these large move-



ments within Protestantism fundamentally shaped America's sense of itself as a nation. The ultimate resolution of this conflict, Haselby contends, was expressed in the rise of Andrew Jackson.

The post-revolutionary decades in America may have seen the greatest explosion of Christian religiosity since the seventeenth century or even the Reformation. The entire religious landscape of America was transformed. In 1760 the dominant denominations in colonial America had been the Anglicans and the Congregationalists—traditional state churches with Old World connections. By the end of the eighteenth century the dominant denominations had become the Baptists and Methodists—revivalist sects that had no connection with any state whatever. And the West was where these revivalist sects especially flourished. Not only were the traditional Old World churches fragmented but the fragments themselves shattered in what seemed at times to be an endless process of fission, ultimately creating sects that no one had ever heard of. “All Christendom has been decomposed, broken in pieces” in a “fiery furnace of democracy,” said a bewildered New England Federalist, Harrison Gray Otis.

Haselby is at pains to emphasize that this explosion of religiosity in the West was not shaped by American nationalism. Despite what Tocqueville claimed in his *Democracy in America*, he says, “popular religious movements on the

frontier flourished independently of nationalist ideals and influences.” In the absence of a strong state and an established church, popular Protestantism “offered alternative forms of sovereignty” and “invented new forms of authority.” For the people in the trans-Appalachian West it was “a greater and more radical force than the revolutionary republicanism of secular intellectuals.” Protestantism created its own religious nationalism.

At the outset of his book Haselby correctly assumes “that the War of Independence posed rather than answered the question of American nationality.” There was very little sense of Americanism in 1776. In fact, it was British officials who first called the colonists “Americans.” In 1776 when Jefferson or John Adams talked about “my country” he meant Virginia or Massachusetts, each of which had a century and a half of history to sustain its inhabitants’ loyalty. Against that loyalty the new United States could scarcely compete. The Declaration of Independence drawn up by the Continental Congress was actually a declaration not by the American people but by “thirteen united States of America.”

At first these thirteen independent states formed a treaty, a “league of friendship,” the so-called Articles of Confederation. This treaty, ratified in 1781, was not an early version of

the federal Constitution; instead, the Articles were an alliance of the thirteen separate states that resembles the present-day European Union. At the outset leaders faced the problem of creating a sense of American nationalism that is similar to the problem of the various European nations today trying to create a sense of Europeanism.

Even the creation of the federal government in 1788–1789 did not solve the problem of unifying the nation. The new federal government, says Haselby, “faced two formidable nation-building challenges, the future of the Native Americans (and their land claims) and the establishment of US sovereignty over the frontier. The state was unable to address either crisis.” Certainly the federal government was weak by European standards, but Haselby ignores the role the United States Army played in defeating the Indians, freeing up land for settlers and speculators, and bringing some order to at least the northwestern portion of the frontier. Still, he is essentially correct in stating that “the United States began a vast and unique continental colonization project” without the traditional instruments of a strong state or church. Those who crossed over the Appalachians into the West had very little sense of Americanism, and eastern leaders were constantly fearful that they would separate and go their own way.

This is the setting for Haselby's argument that a major conflict between two distinct forces of Protestantism in the West contributed to a new sense of religious nationalism. He builds his argument slowly, and the reader is not always sure where it is going. He devotes his first chapter to the separation of church and state embodied in Thomas Jefferson's famous bill for religious liberty passed in Virginia in 1786. Although Jefferson naively believed that passage of his bill showed that Virginians were becoming more enlightened and rational like himself, James Madison, a fellow secularist who shepherded the bill through the Virginia legislature, shrewdly realized that it was the multiplicity of sects in Virginia and their fear of Anglicanism and jealousy of one another that actually made possible the destruction of any religious establishment in Virginia. “In essence,” writes Haselby, “Madison had seized upon sectarianism to further secularism.”

By the early nineteenth century, the secular or deistic vision of Jefferson and Madison was totally out of touch with American reality, especially in the West. Methodism had come to dominate the settlements on the frontier. There had been no Methodists in America in 1760, but by the early nineteenth century they had become the largest denomination in the country—despite the fact that the founder of English Methodism, John Wesley, had publicly opposed the American Revolution. The Methodists benefited from having uneducated itinerant ministers who were willing to preach anywhere—on town greens, before county



courthouses, on potters' fields, and even in the churches of other denominations. By offering an anti-Calvinist message of free will and earned grace, the Methodist preachers essentially told people that they could bring about their own salvation.

But these preachers, says Haselby, were not much interested in the fate of the United States. "Methodism," he emphasizes, "was not a nationalist movement. It pioneered the settlement of the frontier for religious reasons. Its goals were spiritual and social, not political." It took no part in the War of 1812, and had no notion of "a mythical or sacred American nation."

If the secular or deistic vision of Jefferson was overwhelmed by frontier revivalism, what about the Federalist vision of the West created by New England intellectuals? In an extraordinarily insightful chapter, Haselby analyzes the writings of the Connecticut Wits—literary figures such as David Humphreys, Joel Barlow, Noah Webster, Timothy Dwight, and John Trumbull—who starting in the mid-1760s produced an idealized image of America that was Protestant New England writ large. The Wits imagined an American empire that was aggressive, hierarchical, and theological, but also antislavery and antiracist. The United States would become an imperialistic society of devoutly Christian farmers, artisans, and tradesmen led by a virtuous elite, bent on conquering not just the American West but the entire world.

This Federalist vision of America, Puritan in its origins, was not much

more relevant to the realities of American society than Jefferson's deistic vision. The election of Jefferson as president in 1800 frightened the New England Federalists. By the time of the War of 1812 they were convinced that the country had become completely dominated by Virginian slaveholders and was heading entirely in the wrong direction. In despair over the war and wondering whether they had made a mistake in 1776 in breaking from England, the Federalist leaders met in a convention in Hartford in December 1814 and proposed a series of amendments to the Constitution designed to reduce the power of the southern planters in the nation. Unfortunately they brought their proposals to Washington in January 1815 just as news reached the public of the peace treaty ending the war and Andrew Jackson's overwhelming victory over the British at New Orleans. The Federalists, some of whom had threatened secession, were discredited, and their political party disintegrated.

The political failure of the Federalists led upper-class New Englanders to throw their energy and money into quite different projects. If the Federalists could not win political elections, they could at least save the country in other ways. Liberal northeastern intellectuals and conservative New England clerics came together to create Protestant missionary and moral improvement societies that reached not just to the American West but to the farthest corners of the globe. Realizing that their revulsion against Jeffersonian democracy allied them with their cousins across the Atlantic, the

Federalists collaborated with the English and turned the mission movement into an Anglo-American phenomenon. The most famous of them, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), formed in 1810, Haselby says, was "probably... the greatest transnational enterprise of nineteenth-century America."

Although Haselby realizes that the mission movement was international, he concentrates on the saving of the American West from the chaos of frontier revivalism. Protestantism was still crucial, but less as a means of personal salvation and more as an instrument of nation-building. Unlike the revivalists, the various Christian mission associations were intended to make citizens rather than to save souls. William Ellery Channing, the Harvard Unitarian, and Elias Boudinot, "the most influential Christian layman in America," became important leaders of this national ecumenical movement that was designed to build institutions and civilize the West. Missionaries would bring Bibles, tracts, and Christian enlightenment to the people of the West bewildered by the chaos and competition among the revivalists.

In order to personalize the struggle between the contesting classes of Protestants, Haselby focuses on the conflict in Kentucky between the renegade Presbyterian revivalist preacher Richard McNemar, who became a Shaker, and the Revolutionary War hero and famous author Colonel James Smith. The contest in the 1810s between these two men, involving, at first, exchanges of pamphlets and then violence,

captured the essence of the conflict between frontier revivalism and the intensely Protestant patriotism, the nationalist evangelism, which, riding high from victory in the Revolution, had turned to the mission of continental colonization.

In effect, it was a fight between the two principal Protestant forces that Haselby had described as opposed at the beginning of his book. For McNemar, Christianity and the Bible were more important than the United States and its Constitution. What aggravated the conflict were the connections that McNemar and the Shakers had with the Shawnee Indians. To Colonel Smith, McNemar's ignoring of the Constitution and the Shakers' sympathy for the Indians meant that the revivalists and the Shakers were anti-American and a threat to civil order. The fact that both Smith and McNemar were evangelical Protestants, writes Haselby, complicates any easy understanding of evangelical Protestantism on the frontier.

From this analysis of personal conflict on the frontier, Haselby moves to a much more detailed description of the ways in which the Protestant missionary and moral improvement societies sought to level religious diversity and homogenize Americans, and thus contributed to the religious nationalism of America. The ABCFM, for example, declared that it was committed to ensuring that "the same Gospel which is preached in the Middle and Southern and Western States, is also preached in the Eastern States."

Eager to avoid religious distinctions that might disrupt their larger goals,

these missionary associations turned away from serious theology and concentrated on a Protestantism of ethics and maxims. In the thinking of the mission movement the various religious groups now became less "sects" and more "denominations," which better fit their enhanced relationship to the nation; they were now all parts of the project of becoming Americans. The consensus in theological matters that these missionary associations created, of course, did not exist among the various frontier revivalists who were fighting among themselves for souls.

In important ways, writes Haselby, the eastern elite-dominated mission organizations "marked a rupture with both revolutionary republicanism and the history of Protestantism." Secular-minded leaders like James Madison considered these powerful chartered missionary corporations to be anti-republican, and they became alarmed by their growth. These "Ecclesiastical Bodies," said Madison, were an "evil lurking under plausible disguises." At the same time, under the corporate leadership of the mission movement, Protestantism in America became stronger, more dynamic, and more homogeneously nationalist than it had ever been. The American Bible Society, for example, declared that its goals were best attained by its being a "national society" of "undisputed magnitude."

The amounts of money raised by these benevolent organizations were enormous, and their outreach to the remotest parts of the world was astonishing. Hundreds of thousands of Bibles and tracts were printed and distributed. By 1825 the American Bible Society was dispensing Bibles in 140 different languages. "It was not popular literature," says Haselby, "because there was no popular demand; rather it was the first instance of American mass media: media produced with the strategic goal of mass distribution." Although the missionary movements had been initiated by New England clerics, well-to-do northeastern businessmen soon came to finance and dominate them. "By 1830, the ABCFM was spending \$100,000 a year, almost twice Harvard University's 1830 total annual income, to support a missionary force of 224 ordained ministers, 600 native teachers, and 50,000 students." Given such expenses, control of the missionary movement inevitably shifted from Boston to New York, where the money was. In fact, the constitution of the American Bible Society required that two thirds of its board of managers reside in New York City.

In his conclusion Haselby seeks to resolve the tension between the two principal Protestant contestants of frontier revivalism and national evangelism by making Andrew Jackson the crucial mediating figure. Jackson's tough rustic manners made him a natural representative of the frontier; but at the same time he was a dedicated patriot and nationalist. Jackson's anti-elitism and his attacks on the Bank of the United States, the symbol of big business, resonated with small farmers and working people, especially those on the frontier. "Jackson," says Haselby, "was the natural choice of those small Western farmers and settlers aggrieved by the missionaries and the Bank." He stood

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with the westerners against a corrupt eastern elite. He also stood with them against the Indians who were supported by the eastern mission movement.

The missionary societies had begun by trying to incorporate the native peoples into the American nation. They had learned from earlier efforts in the colonial period that it was impossible to Christianize the heathen Indians before they were civilized. Hence they wanted the Indians to own property, learn to read and write, and become small farmers like other Americans. But most ordinary white Americans just wanted the Indians out of the way. Jackson's hostility toward the Indians and his decision to remove them to territory beyond the Mississippi forced the mission movement to choose sides: to decide between their dream of incorporating the Indians into the nation or their loyalty to the Union. Were they justice-minded Protestants or were they patriotic nationalists? "The missions movement," says Haselby, "chose the latter."

The state of Georgia had wanted the Indians removed, and since Christian missionaries were the most effective opponents of Indian removal, the Georgia government ordered them to leave Cherokee lands. When Samuel Worcester and a colleague working on behalf of the ABCFM refused to leave, the Georgia government in 1831 arrested them and sentenced them to four years of hard labor. Worcester appealed to the Supreme Court, which decided in *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832) that Georgia had no constitutional right to Indian lands and no right to convict the missionaries. But President Jackson was not about to enforce this decision.

Finally, at the behest of the ABCFM, Worcester and his colleague, after seventeen months of harsh imprisonment, gave up the struggle to get the government to enforce the Supreme Court's decision in support of Indian rights. In light of the Nullification Crisis in 1832, in which the state of South Carolina threatened the Union by declaring an act of the federal government null and void, Worcester chose to save the Union instead of continuing to fight the state of Georgia. He explained that he would have persisted, but he feared that further attempts to enforce the Supreme Court's decision on behalf of the rights of the Cherokees would "be attended with consequences injurious to our beloved country."

The success of Jackson's policies and rhetoric, Haselby contends, was influenced by the Protestant contest between frontier revivalism and national evangelism. "This fight within Anglo-American Protestantism helps explain why 'Indian removal' happened, when and how it did." Jackson's actions appealed in different ways to the three basic parts of America's political society—southern planters, the northeastern elite, and small farmers and producers—and fundamentally reshaped that society. "The crisis of 'Indian removal,' and its rationalizations," Haselby says in his final sentence, "brought together and illuminated a mixture of voluntarism, theologizing, anti-elitism, constitutionalism, and racism that remain familiar components of American nationality."

disparate elements into a smooth and comprehensive whole? An enormous historical literature exists for each of the parts Haselby writes about. We know a great deal about the evangelical mission and benevolent movements in the early Republic. We also know a great deal about frontier revivalism in the decades following the Revolution, especially from Nathan Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1989).

Haselby mentions Hatch's book but casually dismisses it because it challenges his thesis that revivalist religion owed little to the political ideas of the Revolution. It's true that most of the revivalists on the frontier were much more concerned with saving Christian souls than making republican citizens. Nevertheless, the political ideas of the

American Revolution directly affected some of the revivalism that flourished on the frontier. In order to justify his breaking away from Francis Asbury and the mainstream Methodists and establishing his Republican Methodists in 1794, James O'Kelly, for example, proudly invoked the Revolution and "the sweets of liberty" it brought.

Likewise, the renegade Baptist Elias Smith sought to make religion as republican as the American government had become. By 1815 his newspaper had fourteen hundred subscribers and over fifty agents around the country. The maverick Presbyterian Barton Stone of Kentucky, cofounder of the Disciples of Christ, said that from the beginning he had drunk "deeply into the spirit of liberty and was so warmed by the soul-inspiring draughts, that I

could not hear the name of British, or Tories, without feeling a rush of blood through the whole system." It's inconceivable that the explosion of popular religiosity in the early Republic could have taken place without the Revolution and its wholesale defiance of traditional authority.

Still, Haselby's argument, overly schematic as it sometimes is, has a convincing power. He brings together so many loose ends and ties them up in such a neat package that the reader cannot help being persuaded to accept it whole. His research is extensive, and his style is colloquial ("When it came to culture and ideas, New England punched above its weight"). Despite the sometimes contrived character of its categories and classifications, he has written a book to be reckoned with. □

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In 1609 Galileo Galilei turned his gaze, magnified twentyfold by lenses of Dutch design, toward the heavens, touching off a revolution in human thought. A decade later those same lenses delivered the possibility of a second revolution, when Galileo discovered that by inverting their order he could magnify the very small. For the first time in human history, it lay in our power to see the building blocks of bodies, the causes of diseases, and the mechanism of reproduction. Yet according to Paul Falkowski's *Life's Engines*:

Galileo did not seem to have much interest in what he saw with his inverted telescope. He appears to have made little attempt to understand, let alone interpret, the smallest objects he could observe.

Bewitched by the moons of Saturn and their challenge to the heliocentric model of the universe, Galileo ignored the possibility that the magnified fleas he drew might have anything to do with the plague then ravaging Italy. And so for three centuries more, one of the cruellest of human afflictions would rage on, misunderstood and thus unpreventable, taking the lives of countless millions.

Perhaps it's fundamentally human both to be awed by the things we look up to and to pass over those we look down on. If so, it's a tendency that has repeatedly frustrated human progress. Half a century after Galileo looked into his "inverted telescope," the pioneers of microscopy Antonie van Leeuwenhoek and Robert Hooke revealed that a Lilliputian universe existed all around and even inside us. But neither of them had students, and their researches ended in another false dawn for microscopy. It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century, when German manufacturers began producing superior instruments, that the discovery of the very small began to alter science in fundamental ways.

Today, driven by ongoing technological innovations, the exploration of the "nanoverse," as the realm of the minuscule is often termed, continues to gather pace. One of the field's greatest pioneers is Paul Falkowski, a biological oceanographer who has spent much of his scientific career working at the intersection of physics, chemistry, and biology. His book *Life's Engines: How Microbes Made Earth Habitable* focuses on one of the most astonishing

discoveries of the twentieth century—that our cells are comprised of a series of highly sophisticated "little engines" or nanomachines that carry out life's vital functions. It is a work full of surprises, arguing for example that all of life's most important innovations were in existence by around 3.5 billion years ago—less than a billion years after Earth formed, and a period at which our planet was largely hostile to living things. How such mind-bending complexity could have evolved at such an early stage, and in such a hostile envi-

a straightforward process. The ribosomes have no direct contact with our DNA, so must act by reading messenger RNA, molecules that convey genetic information from the DNA. Ribosomes consist of two major complexes that work like a pair of gears: they move over the RNA, and attach amino acids to the emerging protein.

All ribosomes—whether in the most humble bacteria or in human bodies—operate at the same rate, adding just ten to twenty amino acids per second to the growing protein string. And so are our

the area of high density into the area of lower density. But in order to do so in the cell, they must pass through the ATP nanomachine, and their flow through the minute electric motor turns its rotor counterclockwise. For every 360-degree turn the rotor makes, three molecules of ATP are created.

Living things use a great many primary energy sources to create ATP. The most primitive living entities are known as archaea. Though bacteria-like, they are a distinct group whose various members seem to have exploited almost every energy source available on the early Earth. Some, known as methanogens, cause carbon dioxide to react with hydrogen to create the electrochemical gradient required to make ATP, producing methane as a by-product. Others use ammonia, metal ions, or hydrogen gas to create the electrochemical gradient. Bacteria also use a variety of energy sources, but at some point a group of bacteria started to use sunlight to power photosynthesis. This process yielded vastly more energy than other sources, giving its possessors a huge evolutionary advantage. Falkowski has spent most of his career unraveling the deep mystery of photosynthesis and how it changed the world.

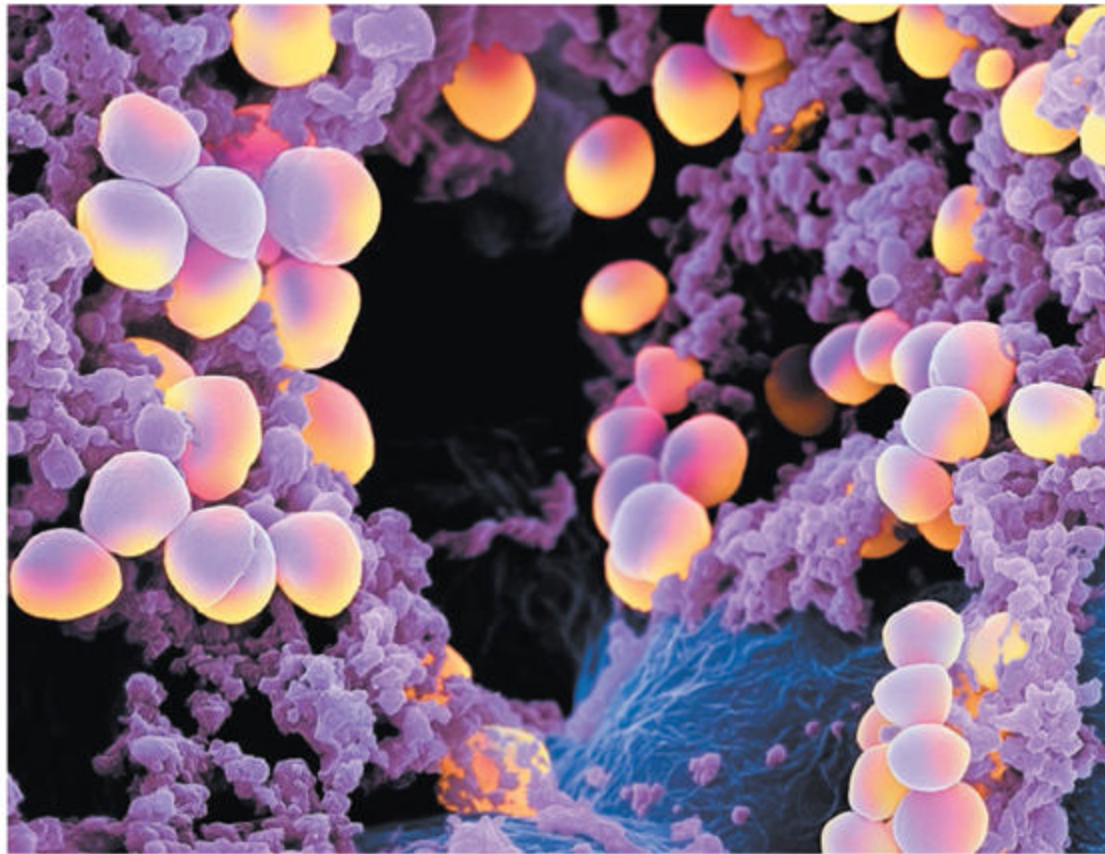
He calls the photosynthetic process "almost magical." His description gives a flavor of the magic involved:

When one, very specific chlorophyll molecule embedded in a reaction center absorbs the energy from a photon, the energy of the light particle can push an electron off the chlorophyll molecule. For about a billionth of a second, the chlorophyll molecule becomes positively charged.

The electron "hole" in the chlorophyll molecule is in turn filled by an electron from "a quartet of manganese [the chemical element] atoms held in a special arrangement on one side of a membrane." The electron "hole" thus formed in the manganese quartet is filled with electrons from a water molecule. This causes the water molecule to fall apart, creating free oxygen.

Photosynthesis permits a local and temporary reversal of the second law of thermodynamics—the creation of order out of disorder. Magical indeed, but in early 2014 photosynthesis was revealed to be even more magical than Falkowski's book allows. Physicists based in the United Kingdom demonstrated that quantum mechanics plays a vital part in the photosynthetic process, by helping to transport the energy it captures efficiently, in a wavelike manner.<sup>1</sup>

If chemistry is not your cup of tea, Falkowski offers an alternative way



A colorized image, made with a scanning electron microscope, of *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteria. According to a recent National Geographic feature on microbes, *Staphylococcus aureus* 'lives harmlessly in the noses of about a third of us. But it can turn rogue, causing skin infections—or worse.'

ronment, has forced a fundamental reconsideration of the origins of life itself.

At a personal level, Falkowski's work is also challenging. We are used to thinking of ourselves as composed of billions of cells, but Falkowski points out that we also consist of trillions of electrochemical machines that somehow coordinate their intricate activities in ways that allow our bodies and minds to function with the required reliability and precision. As we contemplate the evolution and maintenance of this complexity, wonder grows to near incredulity.

One of the most ancient of Falkowski's biological machines is the ribosome, a combination of proteins and nucleic acids that causes protein synthesis. It is an entity so tiny that even with an electron microscope, it is hard to see it. As many as 400 million ribosomes could fit in a single period at the end of a sentence printed in *The New York Review*. Only with the advent of synchrotrons—machines that accelerate the movements of particles, and can be used to create very powerful X-rays—have its workings been revealed. Ribosomes use the instructions embedded in our genetic code to make complex proteins such as those found in our muscles and other organs. The manufacture of these proteins is not

bodies built up by tiny mechanistic operations, one protein at a time, until that stupendous entity we call a human being is complete. All living things possess ribosomes, so these complex micromachines must have existed in the common ancestor of all life. Perhaps their development marks the spark of life itself. But just when they first evolved, and how they came into being, remain two of the great mysteries of science.

All machines require a source of energy to operate, and the energy to run not only ribosomes but all cellular functions comes from the same source—a universal "energy currency" molecule known as adenosine triphosphate (ATP). In animals and plants ATP is manufactured in special cellular structures known as mitochondria. The nanomachines that operate within the mitochondria are minute biological electrical motors that, in a striking parallel with their mechanical counterparts, possess rotors, stators, and rotating catalytic heads.

The ATP nanomachine is the means by which life uses electrical gradients, or the difference in ion concentration and electrical potential from one point to another, to create energy. The nanomachine is located in a membrane that separates a region of the cell with a high density of protons (hydrogen ions) from an area with a lower density. Just as in a battery, the protons pass from

<sup>1</sup>See Jon Cartwright, "Quantized Vibrations Are Essential to Photosynthesis, Say Physicists," *physicsworld.com*, January 22, 2014.



of thinking about how photosynthesis works—as a microscopic sound and light show. The light is of course the photon that energizes the performance, while the sound is provided by the chlorophyll molecule, which flexes with an audible “pop” when it loses its electron. The phenomenon was discovered by Alexander Graham Bell, who in 1880 used what he called the “photoacoustic effect” to make a device he named the photophone. Bell used the photophone to transmit a wireless voice telephone message seven hundred feet, and considered it to be his greatest invention. And perhaps it was, since it was the precursor of fiber optic communication.

The way that the sophisticated nanomachines Falkowski describes became incorporated into a single complex cell, such as those our bodies consist of, is so incredible that it reads like a fairy tale. Using a system known as “quorum sensing,” microbes can communicate, and they use this ability to switch on and off various functions within their own populations and within ecosystems composed of different microbe species. Quorum sensing can even operate when one microbe swallows another, as happened over a billion years ago when a larger cell began to communicate with a smaller one that it had ingested. Quorum sensing permitted the potential food item to live inside its host instead of being digested. Then it allowed genes to switch on and off in ways that benefited the new chimeric, or genetically mixed, entity. The two genomes coexisting in the chimera even managed to exchange some genes, further enabling it to operate as a competent whole. As a result of these

changes, the organism that was swallowed was transformed into a mitochondria, and began supplying ATP to the first eukaryotic cell—that is, a cell containing a nucleus and other complicated structures.

As impossible as this process sounds, it was followed by an even more outlandish occurrence. Somehow the newly created binary organism swallowed yet another entity—a kind of bacteria that could photosynthesize. Again the ingested entity lived on inside the cell, using quorum sensing to somehow synchronize its “almost magical” nanomachinery with those of the binary organism. This newly constituted “trinity organism” became the photosynthetic ancestor of every plant on earth.

Microbes control the Earth, Falkowski tells us. They created it in its present state, and maintain it in its current state by creating a global electron marketplace that we call the biosphere. Falkowski argues that we can conceive of our world as a great, unitary electrical device, driven by the myriad tiny electric motors and the other electrochemical nanomachinery of cells. Viewing the world this way reveals hitherto unappreciated dangers in some modern science.

Some molecular biologists are doing research on ways of inserting genes into microorganisms in order to create new kinds of life that have never previously existed. Others are busy working out whether the cellular nanomachinery itself might be improved. Falkowski recommends that

rather than tinker with organisms that we can't reverse engineer, a

much better use of our intellectual abilities and technological capabilities would be to better understand how the core nanomachines evolved and how these machines spread across the planet to become the engines of life.

Just how far we are from obtaining an understanding of the evolution of the nanomachines is conveyed in Peter Ward and Joe Kirschvink's latest book, *A New History of Life*. Both authors are iconoclasts, and their book is at times breathtakingly unorthodox. Yet their ideas are at the cutting edge of many debates about the evolution of life, making their book challenging and rewarding. The work of the paleontologist is like that of a restorer of ancient mosaics: the further we go back in time, the fewer tesserae, or mosaic components, we have. Those seeking to understand the origin of the nanomachines have to work with the equivalent of just half a dozen pieces from a picture comprising tens of thousands. Time and our restless Earth have destroyed the remainder. Despite this awesome handicap, Ward and Kirschvink are convinced that, owing to the new technologies, we are at last asking the right questions.

We have a reasonably concise date for the formation of Earth—4,560 billion years ago, give or take 10 million years. The half a billion years that followed, known as the Hadean Eon, were momentous. A huge asteroid slammed into the planet, forming the moon and transforming Earth into a ball of molten rock. As Earth cooled, the progenitors of

the modern core and crust were formed. Earth's oldest rocks—tiny, 4.4-billion-year-old zircon crystals from Western Australia—are the only physical evidence we have of this period. Chemical analysis reveals that they formed where ocean water was being sucked down into the mantle—the layer of the earth between the crust and the core. So we can surmise that Earth cooled quickly after the asteroid collision, and that at an early stage it had oceans.

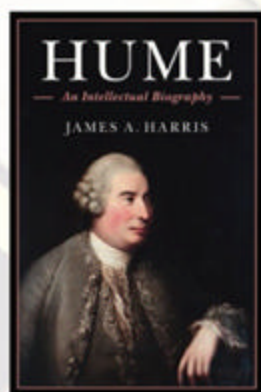
Despite the presence of oceans, Earth was almost certainly hostile to life in the Hadean Eon. Asteroid impacts repeatedly shook the planet, boiling its oceans and changing the atmosphere. But by four billion years ago, things had begun to settle down. The 1.5-billion-year-long Archean Eon had begun, and it was over the first third of this period that the nanomachines either evolved, or as Ward and Kirschvink argue, colonized Earth from elsewhere.

As we ponder life's origins, Ward and Kirschvink warn against thinking in simplistic terms like life and death, instead encouraging us to consider the “newly discovered place in between.” Life's most distant origins lie in the nonliving precursor molecules for RNA, organic compounds known as amino acids. They have been found in meteorites, are presumed to be widespread in the universe, and their origins must greatly predate Earth's origins. The nanomachines possess attributes of life, and when brought together in a cell they clearly cross the threshold into the self-regulating, replicating entity that we recognize as a living thing.

A slick layer of graphite preserved in 3.8-billion-year-old rocks near Isua,

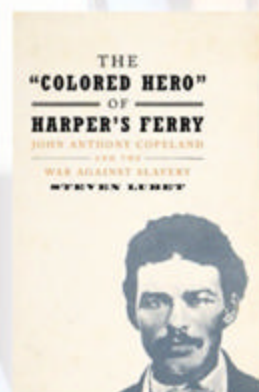
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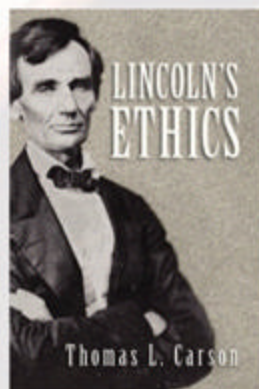
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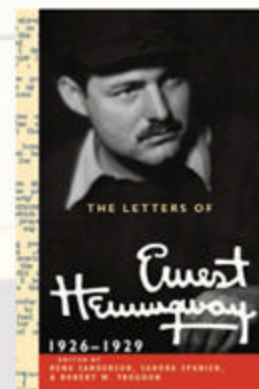


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Greenland, was long believed to contain the earliest evidence of life on Earth. But recent studies reveal that the carbon composing the graphite was not formed by life at all. The next oldest evidence was long thought to be 3.5-billion-year-old microscopic fossils of algae from Western Australia. But recent research has shown that the "fossils" are far more recent, and in any case may not be fossils at all, but crystals. A 2012 study announced that fossils of bacterial ecosystems dating back 3.49 billion years had been discovered in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, and this is now widely accepted as the oldest evidence of life.<sup>2</sup>

Charles Darwin famously speculated that life began in a "shallow, sun-warmed pond." But back when Earth formed, its surface was probably covered entirely, or almost so, by oceans. And because Earth lacked an ozone layer for the first two billion years of its existence, it is unlikely that shallow waters could have hosted life's origin because ultraviolet radiation would have torn apart the delicate, assembling RNA.

Currently favored candidates for an earthly origin of life range from hot springs to mid-ocean ridge vents known as "black smokers." Conditions there may have aided the formation of the ever-longer strings of amino acids and molecules, including RNA, that were eventually able to metabolize and reproduce. Mid-oceanic ridges are protected from ultraviolet radiation by the overlying ocean. They are also rich in the elements required for DNA. Additionally, the majority of the most ancient life forms on Earth are thermophiles, small organisms some of which thrive in near-boiling water. One problem for this theory is that water attacks and breaks up the nucleic acid polymers that make up RNA. And unless protected, it is also destabilized by heat.

Most research focuses on a search for the earliest life. But perhaps we should be searching instead for evidence of the first nanomachines. Chemical signatures in rocks that result from the activities of the nanomachines offer one means of doing this. For example, studies show that the nanomachines that make atmospheric nitrogen, and can add oxygen to the ammonia so produced in order to create nitrate, were in existence by at least 2.5 billion years ago.<sup>3</sup>

Joe Kirschvink argues that Earth's rocks are the wrong place to look for the nanomachines' origins. He is a leading proponent of the seemingly radical theory that the nanomachines, and perhaps life itself, originated on the ice caps and glaciers of ancient Mars. The case is fleshed out fully in *A New History of Life*, and recent discoveries are building an impressive body of supporting evidence. NASA's Curiosity lander, for example, has found evidence for ancient Martian streams

and ponds: billions of years ago Mars probably had an ocean, as well as land and ice caps. The red planet may have offered a far less hostile environment for assembling naked strings of RNA than Earth. Kirschvink also points out that space travel by early life is not improbable. Mars is small, so its gravity is weak compared with that of Earth. Asteroids could therefore have thrown up a lot of rocks capable of escaping Martian gravity. And we know, through experiments, that meteorites originating from Mars can reach Earth without being sterilized.

But if the nanomachines did originate on Mars, where might they have crossed the "Darwinian threshold" and become truly living things? Kirschvink



A colored transmission electron micrograph of a bacteria-infecting virus, or phage. According to National Geographic, phages 'are the most abundant life-form on the planet, their number far exceeding that of stars in the universe. Trillions inhabit each of us.'

argues that Earth's atmosphere offers a plausible nursery. Held aloft by fierce winds and currents, the Martian RNA fragments may have mixed with each other, exchanging fragments from one chain to another. Natural selection would have favored the more functionally complex and efficient strands, which would then have proliferated. Eventually, perhaps when the strands became encompassed by cell walls made of tiny droplets of lipids (a type of molecule that includes fats and waxes), the mass transfer of genes between the nascent nanomachines slowed and their chemistry stabilized.

The Nobel laureate Christian de Duve believed that at this point life would have emerged from nonlife very quickly, perhaps in minutes. Safe behind its lipid cell walls, the RNA could enter the ocean, finding the rich trove of nutrients that exists around the black smokers. From then on, Darwinian evolution would have ensured the survival of those that operated most efficiently in a hot environment. This story is, of course, almost entirely unsupported by evidence. It is a scenario—a vision of how things might have been—rather than a fleshed-out scientific theory. It is nonetheless useful because it provides a target for future researchers.

*A New History of Life* deals with life's entire trajectory, from the time before its first spark to the present. The conventional view is that for a billion years after life first evolved, very little seems

to have happened. Then, over perhaps a few hundred million years, oxygen utterly transformed the face of Earth. That oxygen came from the most complex cellular nanomachinery ever to evolve—the trinity organisms, composed of three organisms embedded within a single cell, that could photosynthesize. But Falkowski's nanomachines make me think that the billion-year "pause" before their emergence is illusory. Enormous changes to life's engines occurred as they transformed from relatively simple nanomachines to planet-altering photosynthesizers.

A mystery surrounds the oxygenation of Earth. The oxygen produced by the photosynthesizers should have interacted immediately with organic matter, preventing any increases in free atmospheric oxygen. And indeed this is what appears to have happened for hundreds of millions of years after the first trinity organisms evolved. What was needed, if free oxygen was to accumulate in the atmosphere, was for some of the organic matter it reacted with to be put out of the oxygen's reach.

Falkowski thinks that "the oxygenation of Earth had much to do with chance and contingencies." Ward and Kirschvink agree, saying that one of the greatest contingencies was the creation of what we call fossil fuels. For fossil fuels and other buried organic molecules are organic matter put out of oxygen's reach many millions of years ago, and they exist in Earth's crust in direct proportion to the amount of oxygen in the atmosphere.

The dependence of evolutionary change on contingencies is further highlighted when Ward and Kirschvink discuss the evolution of the first large animals. They arose about half a billion years ago, in what is known as the Cambrian explosion. Scientists have long argued about why they evolved so rapidly, and at that time. Ward and Kirschvink think they have an answer, in the form of "true polar wander." Essentially, the idea is that as the continents moved over the face of the planet, they altered its center of gravity. By around half a billion years ago they had so shifted the gravitational center that the Earth's outer layers had begun to move relative to Earth's core. Over millions of years, the landmasses originally lying over the poles came to lie over the equator. This southward shift may have released methane trapped in clathrates (ice-methane combinations kept stable by low temperatures or pressure), triggering a release of greenhouse gases that warmed the climate and provided favorable conditions for an increase in biodiversity. There is evidence to back parts of this theory. Something odd was happening to Earth's poles around the time complex life evolved. And "true polar wander" is characteristic of other planets, including Mars. But again, Ward and Kirschvink are pushing the envelope with this theory.

Neither *Life's Engines* nor *A New History of Life* is an easy book for the nonscientist, but both are immensely rewarding. Like Galileo's telescope and microscope, they focus on the very small (Falkowski) and the very big picture (Ward and Kirschvink). Both are full of novel thinking about life's origin and subsequent evolution. Taken together, they help us begin to see where the next big questions about life's origins lie, and how they might be investigated. □

Biozentrum, University of Basel/Science Source



# The Frenzy About High-Tech Talent

Andrew Hacker

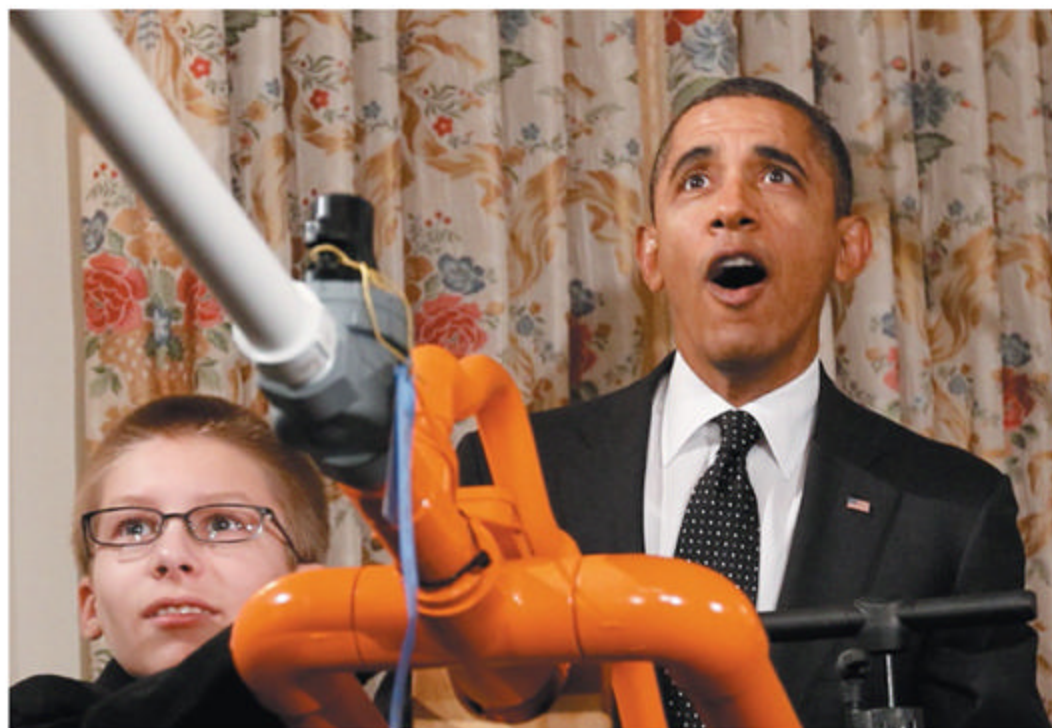
1.

Pronouncements like the following have become common currency: “The United States is *falling behind* in a global ‘race for talent’ that will determine the country’s future prosperity, power, and security.” In *Falling Behind?*, Michael Teitelbaum argues that alarms like this one, which he quotes, are not only overblown but are often sounded by people who do not disclose their motives. Teitelbaum vehemently denies that we are lagging in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, now commonly abbreviated as STEM. Still, he writes that there are facts to be faced:

- In less than 15 years, China has moved from 14th place to second place in published research articles.
- General Electric has now located the majority of its R&D personnel outside the United States.
- Only four of the top ten companies receiving United States patents last year were United States companies.
- The United States ranks 27th among developed nations in the proportion of college students receiving undergraduate degrees in science or engineering.

A recurring complaint is that not enough of our young people and adults have the kinds of competence the coming century will require, largely because not nearly enough are choosing careers that require the skills of STEM. A decade ago, the Business Roundtable was urging that we “double the number of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics graduates with bachelor’s degrees by 2015.” We’re now at that year, but the number of degrees awarded in those fields has barely budged. More recently, a panel appointed by President Obama asked for another ten-year effort, this time to add “one million additional college graduates with degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.”<sup>1</sup> Where the missile race was measured by numbers of warheads, now we hear of a race to award more diplomas.

Contrary to such alarmist demands, *Falling Behind?* makes a convincing case that even now the US has all the high-tech brains and bodies it needs, or at least that the economy can absorb. Teitelbaum points out that “US higher education routinely awards more degrees in science and engineering than can be employed in science and engineering occupations.” Recent reports reinforce his claim. A 2014 study by the National Science Board found that of 19.5 million holders of degrees in science, technology, engineering, and



President Obama with teenage inventor Joe Hudy of Arizona during a demonstration of Hudy’s *Extreme Marshmallow Cannon* at the White House Science Fair, February 2012

mathematics, only 5.4 million were working in those fields, and a good question is what they do instead. The Center for Economic Policy and Research, tracing graduates from 2010 through 2014, discovered that 28 percent of engineers and 38 percent of computer scientists were either unemployed or holding jobs that did not need their training.<sup>2</sup>

Teitelbaum stresses a fact of the labor market: contrary to the warnings from a variety of panels and roundtables, public and private employers who might hire STEM workers have not been creating enough positions for all the people currently being trained to fill them. Take physics, a quintessential STEM science. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), in its latest *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, forecasts that by 2022 the economy will have 22,700 nonacademic openings for phys-

<sup>2</sup>National Science Board, “Science and Engineering Indicators 2014”; Janelle Jones and John Schmitt, “A College Degree Is No Guarantee,” Center for Economic Policy and Research, May 2014.

icists. Yet during the preceding decade 49,700 people will have graduated with physics degrees. The anomaly is that those urging students toward STEM studies are not pressing employers to ensure that the jobs will be there. And as we shall see, the employers often turn to foreign workers for the jobs they have to fill.

2.

It’s true that the US has fewer people studying the subjects involved in STEM than many other countries. The chief reason is that more of our students choose to major in business and liberal arts. But that doesn’t signify a paucity of interest. Among the high school seniors who took the ACT and SAT tests last year, fully 23 percent said that they intended to major in mathematics, computer science, engineering, or a physical or natural science. And those contemplating programs related to health made up another 19 percent. But something evidently happens between their freshman and senior years. By graduation, the number of students

who start in STEM fields falls by a third and in health by a half. In engineering, of every one hundred who start, only fifty-five make it to a degree. Why the attrition?

For some, the STEM program they planned on may be more demanding than they envisaged. Or they may be put off by how a subject is treated in college. Teitelbaum quotes the president of the Association of American Universities, who cites a less publicized cause: “poor undergraduate teaching in physics, chemistry, biology, math, and engineering, particularly in the freshman and sophomore years.” Of course, bad teaching has varied causes. But it may be more apparent in STEM fields, where fixed material has to be covered; the reactions of many students suggests that many professors apparently see no need to make their teaching appealing. While student ratings have drawbacks, those in Table A hint at serious problems in STEM classrooms (see page 34). In mathematics, few freshmen meet a full-time professor close up. A recent survey by the American Mathematical Society found that 87 percent of all classes are taught by graduate assistants, adjuncts, or instructors on annual contracts.<sup>3</sup>

3.

Modern America was basically built by engineers, from canals to cars to computers, and engineering has long been honored as a crucial occupation. Yet the BLS projects that in the decade ending in 2022, the number of engineering jobs will have increased only by 8.6 percent, which falls short of the 10.6 percent rise expected for the workforce as a whole. Most striking are forecasts for the chemical, mechanical, and electrical specialties, long mainstays of the profession. Together, the three are estimated to grow by only 4.3 percent, well under half the expected growth in the workforce.

How can there be less demand for engineers, since predictions for STEM say their skills will be sorely needed? For many years, firms like General Dynamics and Westinghouse were mainstays of the economy. Yet inadvertently, the engineers they employed were devising equipment and processes that would undercut the skills on which they had built their own careers. Paul Beaudry and his colleagues at the University of British Columbia and York University have called this development “deskilling.” Its rise has been a harsh surprise, since the common wisdom was that we would have to become more highly trained to confront the complexities of our time. Yet Beaudry’s group shows how “high-skilled workers have moved down the occupational ladder and have begun to perform jobs traditionally performed by lower-skilled

## BOOKS AND REPORTS DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE

**Falling Behind?: Boom, Bust, and the Global Race for Scientific Talent**  
by Michael S. Teitelbaum.  
Princeton University Press,  
267 pp., \$29.95

**Occupational Outlook Handbook: 2014–2015**  
by the US Bureau  
of Labor Statistics.  
JIST, 1,002 pp., \$25.95,  
\$19.95 (paper)

**A National Talent Strategy**  
a report by the  
Microsoft Corporation.  
32 pp., available at  
news.microsoft.com

**How to Secure Your H-1B Visa: A Practical Guide for International Professionals and Their US Employers**  
by James A. Bach  
and Robert G. Werner.  
Apress, 165 pp.,  
\$24.99 (paper)

**The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way**  
by Amanda Ripley.  
Simon and Schuster,  
306 pp., \$15.99 (paper)

**Introduction to Technocracy**  
by Howard Scott and others.  
John Day, 61 pp. (1933)

<sup>1</sup>See “Engage to Excel,” a report by the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, February 2012.

<sup>3</sup>Conference Board of the Mathematical Sciences, *AMS Survey of Undergraduate Mathematical Programs* (American Mathematical Society, 2012).



workers.”<sup>4</sup> But this doesn’t literally mean that graduate engineers shift to benchwork as technicians. Rather, their jobs are dissolved and they no longer have a place on the payroll.

Who, then, is handling the tasks that were once the province of graduates of Georgia Tech and Purdue? A recent study by the Brookings Institution found that “half of all STEM jobs are available to workers without a four-year college degree.”<sup>5</sup> Some have two-year diplomas, others earn certificates; but even more are high school graduates who learned of openings and acquired new skills on the job. In Table B, culled from the BLS, I’ve listed a few.

Engineering also illustrates how the economy mishandles the talent it has. At current rates, our universities will be awarding about 760,000 engineering degrees in the decade ahead. But that is over five times what the BLS projects for the profession’s growth. So most who do find jobs will be replacing engineers who are leaving the field, either voluntarily or partially so. They take a variety of jobs, whether in sales, management, or other fields of work. Businesses find they can recruit the graduates they want at salaries that young people find acceptable. What isn’t said is that the pay won’t rise much higher, as shown by the salaries of those in mid-career. According to BLS samplings in 2014, median pay ranged from \$71,369 for civil engineers to \$96,980 for aeronautical engineers. By comparison, the median for practicing nurses is \$83,980, and the median for pharmacists is \$101,920. (There is a special high of \$130,280 for petroleum engineers who get premium pay for working in desert sands or surrounded by arctic ice; they also risk being laid off when petroleum prices fall.)

In engineering—as with computer science—those who start families tend to shift to sales or middle management. But many move to unrelated fields, ranging from real estate to nursing, while others find positions as financial analysts or security consultants. This attrition could be averted by prolonging career spans, as in law and medicine. After all, most engineers—and their software counterparts—still have their expertise in their fifties and sixties. But employers see no need to encourage longer periods of employment, since each year cheaper graduates, both American and foreign, arrive with their résumés.

4.

“A National Talent Strategy,” distributed by the Microsoft Corporation, echoes the warning that the United States faces “a substantial and increasing shortage of individuals with the skills needed to fill the jobs the private sector is creating.” As before, skills refer not to verbal abilities or even a knack for closing a sale, but those based on STEM training. A 2012 survey of Microsoft’s own facilities found “more than 3,400 unfilled research, development and engineering positions.”

<sup>4</sup>Paul Beaudry et al., *The Great Reversal in the Demand for Skilled and Cognitive Tasks* (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2013).  
<sup>5</sup>Jonathan Rothwell, *The Hidden STEM Economy* (Brookings Institution, 2013).

To address this shortfall, Microsoft offers “a two-pronged approach.”

The first is domestic, and urges that training begin early. Microsoft would have all high schools support full programs in computer science, which every student could at least sample. These programs are now relatively rare, accounting for not even one percent of Advanced Placement enrollments. To lift the numbers, Microsoft proposes that related disciplines cede some of their time and dominance, and “allow computer science courses to count as either ‘core’ math or science courses.” If American companies are to win the software wars, a cost may be fewer enrollments in basic physics.

sense to import talents that are in short supply here. As before, the best minds are equated with those who master STEM disciplines—in this case, the personnel Microsoft wants. Hence its call for expanding the H-1B visa program, which enable firms to fill “specialty occupations” such as computer science with workers from abroad. Also, it asks that federal rules be amended to allow retaining “high-skilled foreign STEM talent already employed by companies in the United States.”

A variety of American industries have long held that their survival depends on being permitted to bring in

ving. The H-1B roster also includes Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan Chase, and the Rite-Aid pharmacy chain.

A central question, of course, is why Americans weren’t available or applying for these 262,569 jobs. During the 2001–2011 decade, the most recent for which we have figures, our colleges turned out some 2.5 million graduates in computer science and engineering, which seems a fair-sized pool. On its face, it should contain enough people with the qualifications that Microsoft and Oracle and Rite-Aid expect. One explanation is that these and other firms in fact prefer people from abroad. Indeed, many are already in universities here, where they receive half the graduate degrees in computer science and engineering. Of students from India awarded Ph.D.s, 85 percent were still in the US five years after receiving their degrees.

James Bach and Robert Werner’s *How to Secure Your H-1B Visa* is written for both employers and the workers they hire. They are told that firms must “promise to pay any H-1B employee a competitive salary,” which in theory means what’s being offered “to others with similar experience and qualifications.” At least, this is what the law says. But then there are figures compiled by Zoe Lofgren, who represents much of Silicon Valley in Congress, showing that H-1B workers average 57 percent of the salaries paid to Americans with comparable credentials.

Norman Matloff, a computer scientist at the University of California’s Davis campus, provides some answers. The foreigners granted visas, he found, are typically single or unattached men, usually in their late twenties, who contract for six-year stints, knowing they will work long hours and live in cramped spaces. Being tied to their sponsoring firm, Matloff adds, they “dare not switch to another employer” and are thus “essentially immobile.”<sup>6</sup> For their part, Bach and Warner warn, “it may be risky for you to give notice to your current employer.” Indeed, the perils include deportation if you can’t quickly find another guarantor.

Matloff also found that employers “tailor job requirements so that only the desired foreign applicants qualify” and they “have an arsenal of legal means to reject all US workers who apply.” Despite Microsoft’s talk of “best minds,” the majority of H-1B workers are, in Matloff words, “ordinary people doing ordinary work.” On a Government Accountability Office scale, only 17 percent were graded “fully competent” in their specialty. Typically, they produce the lines of code needed to keep so much of our digitized world functioning. Of course, coding can be challenging and creative. But behind each innovative designer, there’s a need for dozens of routine coders whose main job is to get every symbol, letter, and integer precisely right.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Norman Matloff, “Immigration and the Tech Industry,” *Migration Letters* (May 2013).

<sup>7</sup>Earlier this year, Disney laid off several hundred American technical workers, to be replaced by H-1B arrivals from India. Key to the shift, as Disney phrased it, would be “knowledge transfer.” Thus those slated for dismissal were told that if they wished a severance check, they had to teach

Table A

STUDENTS RATE THEIR PROFESSORS

at colleges that focus on

STEM subjects

Liberal Arts

Cal Tech	65	Beloit	97
Drexel	67	Colby	95
Georgia Tech	64	Grinnell	95
Illinois Institute	68	Kenyon	97
MIT	69	Pomona	95
Purdue	69	Swarthmore	99
Stevens	65	Vassar	96

Source: Princeton Review

Table B

STEM WORK: WHAT IS IT?

Gynecologic Sonographers	Semiconductor Processors
Avionic Equipment Mechanics	Laboratory Phlebotomists
Stenocaptioners	Environmental Inspectors
Cryptanalysis Keyers	Tumor Registrars
Logisticians	Nuclear Monitor Technicians
Electronic Drafters	Prosthodontists
Multimedia Animators	Extruding Specialists
Continuous Mining Operators	Digital Image Technicians
Echocardiographers	Electrophysiologists
Neuroscience Nurses	Maxillofacial Radiologists
Synoptic Meteorologists	Pilates Equipment Designers
Petroleum Pump System Gaugers	Remote Sensing Specialists
Geodetic Surveyors	

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

The report notes that only 4 percent of American bachelors’ degrees are in engineering, compared with China’s 31 percent. The booklet doesn’t explain why these percentages are cited, but leaves the hint that we should be trying to get nearer to the Chinese figure. One way would be to encourage more young people to attend college, especially from underrepresented groups, and give them extra support if they choose STEM majors. Another is to reduce the high attrition among those who start in STEM majors, although the report doesn’t mention doing something about indifferent teaching, which is a possible cause. A third tactic, albeit not openly stated, is to lure undergraduates away from the humanities and other liberal arts as well as the social programs. Left tacit are the costs of such a shift and the wider implications of moving closer to China’s curriculum.

The second strand of “A National Talent Strategy” seeks “to draw the world’s best minds into our economy.” Here Microsoft is unabashedly pro-immigration, holding that it makes

foreign workers. Most familiar has been much of agriculture, which claims that resident citizens will not take the pay that employers can afford. Today the technology sector is making a similar plea, with the obvious difference that it needs more cerebral skills. Under H-1B, candidates must be sponsored by specified employers, with elaborate paperwork on both sides, including avowals that the domestic workforce has been thoroughly combed for qualified candidates. Apparently, the time spent on such applications is worth it.

As of the end of 2012, fully 262,569 H-1B visa-holders were working in the United States. By far the most were from India (168,367), with China a distant second (19,850). Indians are most wanted because they come knowing English and can start on assignments the day after they arrive. Topping the list are “computer-related occupations,” such as coding, followed by engineering. Microsoft leads the employers’ list, with Intel, IBM, and Oracle close behind. But a host of enterprises now have software systems in need of ser-



Most businesses prefer having an oversupply of workers, in part to keep those on board fearful lest they be replaced. And if less money goes to the rank-and-file, that often means that more money is available for the executive floors. In Matloff's view, the dramatic warnings about scarcities of skills are actually "all about an industry wanting to lower wages." To this extent, he argues, wider income spreads between executives and other employees are integral to corporate visions for the years ahead. But unlike in earlier eras, a STEM proletariat will be digitally literate, thanks to the coding classes Microsoft would make universal (and which are increasingly available from other firms and from high-tech education companies providing classes for recent high school graduates as well as older workers; among them are "boot camps" that charge as much as \$12,000 for eight or nine intense weeks). What they'll do as they reach, say, thirty-five years old is not the concern of an economy based on revolving cubicles, marginal salaries, and importing acquiescent labor. In the summer of 2014, Microsoft laid off 18,000 of its employees.

## 5.

On the most recent international mathematics test called PISA (Program for

what they did to the newcomers. See Patrick Thibodeau, "Fury Rises at Disney Over Use of Foreign Workers," *ComputerWorld*, April 29, 2015.

International Student Assessment), students from the United States ranked thirty-second, even lower than Portugal's or Slovenia's. At the top were Singapore, South Korea, and Japan. (China didn't enter, but has been first or second on other lists.) There is no paucity of theories about why Americans fall so short. If schools and teachers get most of the blame, we also hear about adolescent indolence and parental nonchalance, abetted by electronic distractions.

Amanda Ripley's refreshing book, *The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way*, takes a positive approach. She spent time in three countries—Finland, Poland, and South Korea—to find out why they routinely do well. As it turns out, Finland (eighth) and Poland (ninth) might be hardest for the US to emulate, since an egalitarian ethos guides their approach to education. In Finland, for example, teaching children in the lower grades attracts highly qualified graduates. Hypercompetitive South Korea is really the centerpiece of her survey.

PISA's national rankings are derived from standardized tests, with preset answers and seventy-five seconds allotted per problem. Of course, you have to know mathematics. But as Ripley makes clear with South Korea, equally important is mastering the test formats and becoming familiar with the kinds of calculations demanded. She shows how cramming academies aimed at preparing for tests, which run to 10:00 PM every night and enroll 70 percent of all students, end up being more important than the regular schools. In a daytime class she visited, a third of the pupils

were asleep. (Girls strap tiny pillows to their wrists for quick naps at their desks.)

While the night sessions aim to get students places in Korean universities, their tests are akin to those on which international rankings are based, so the prowess gained at the cramming academies counts in world rankings. In Ripley's account, Korean children are willing to endure the system, lest they dishonor their parents. "Competition had become an end unto itself," Ripley remarks, "not the learning it was supposed to motivate." Phrases like "joyless learning" and "hamster wheel" recur; so do "cheating scandals" and "leaked test questions." A study in the *Korean Journal of Pediatrics* found eleventh- and twelfth-graders averaging between five and five-and-a-half hours of sleep per night. Where Korea is concerned, her title—*The Smartest Kids in the World*—has to be sardonic. It raises the question of whether the US would want to lead the world in seventy-five-second tests, with the cost in sleep and, above all, the toll on other kinds of learning.<sup>8</sup> How much does the quality of our society depend on young people acquiring understanding of history, literature, and the basic sciences, as well as the ability to write clear sentences?

<sup>8</sup>See Seonkyeong Rhie et al., "Sleep Patterns and School Performance of Korean Adolescents," *Korean Journal of Pediatrics* (January 2011). On China, see Diane Ravitch, "The Myth of Chinese Super Schools," *The New York Review*, November 20, 2014.

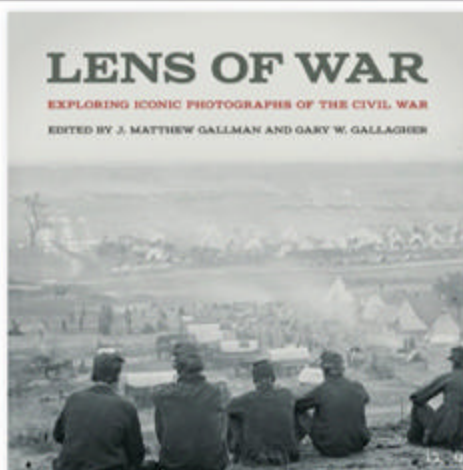
## 6.

In 1933, in the depth of the Great Depression, an engineer named Howard Scott produced a small book he called *Introduction to Technocracy*. This new principle, he predicted, would replace politics and economics as "the instrument for effecting social change." Technocracy, he added, "makes one basic postulate: that the phenomena involved in the functional operation of a social mechanism are metrical." On the premise that everything of significance can be measured, decisions will be relegated to those "disciplined in engineering thought processes." Even then, Scott saw society ready for a technocratic order. "To modern civilized men," he wrote, "explanations offered in the name of science are accepted under the new order of common sense." None of this was meant as ironic, and for a while, Howard Scott had a wide hearing. His vision of technocracy is having a new day.

The fervor over STEM goes beyond promoting a quartet of academic subjects. Rather, it's about the kind of nation and people we are to be. Already in play are efforts to instill the metrics—and morality—of technology within ourselves as individuals and into the texture of society. Artists and poets may have to score high on tests of trinomial distributions if they want bachelors' degrees. In viewing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics as strategic weapons, we are constricting honored callings and narrowing national priorities, while the alleged needs for STEM workers are open to serious question, including whether the demand for them may be exaggerated and manipulated. □

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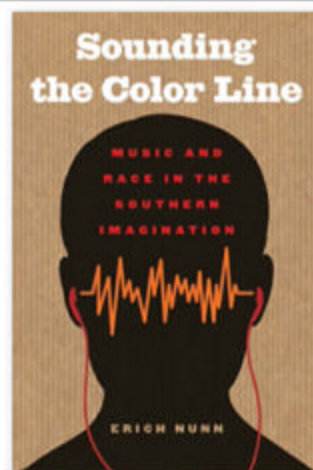
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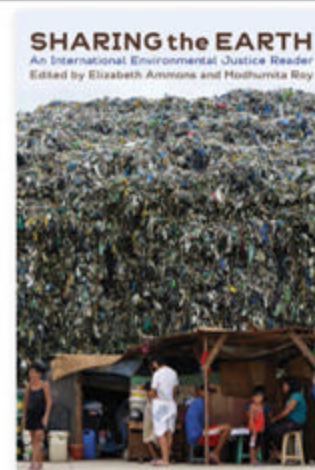
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# Love, Lies, and War

Neal Ascherson

## The Illuminations

by Andrew O'Hagan.  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
293 pp., \$26.00

There are many illuminations in Andrew O'Hagan's ambitious light show of a novel. It's set partly in Scotland and partly in Afghanistan. But in every part of the British Isles "the Illuminations" is a reference to Blackpool, that old proletarian seaside resort in northwest England that switches on its multicolored light show once a year. O'Hagan uses Blackpool as a stage set that becomes steadily more important in his drama. It's at first a place where darkness and the forgettings of dementia obscure the old doings of his characters. But then, toward the end, the metaphorical lights switch on to reveal the relics of a touching, shocking past.

Lights are also felt by O'Hagan's characters to mean a caring sort of love. "He carried a light for her all his life and proved she was easy to love" (a daughter remembering her father). For Anne Quirk, the central figure of the novel, a light is a proof of childhood happiness: her father "fixed up a small light-bulb in the doll's house by her bed so that she could leave it on while she was sleeping, . . . it would stand there no matter what happened in the world." Anne's grandson Luke, just back from soldiering in Afghanistan, takes her to Blackpool to watch the Illuminations blaze up, but the red points of light slinging out over the sea are for Luke too much like Taliban tracer fire: his stomach lurches.

And Anne herself has worked with light all her life. Before family duty, tragedy, and then dementia took her away from her art, she was a photographer of great originality, a small spark in the flame of New York's pre-war avant-garde who was on her way to becoming famous. The darkroom was her life, and the place where she clung to her lover Harry. After Harry departed life and died, Luke became the dearest person to her, and she tried all through his boyhood to enlighten him with "the photographer's gift" of "giving shape" to all around you, and "knowing what's behind appearances." She "gave him lessons in how to aim above himself. She made him unusual. . . ."

Anne Quirk, a figure inspired by the late Scottish-Canadian photographer Margaret Watkins, was born in a middle-class Glasgow family that soon emigrated to Canada. She found her vocation, her art, in New York, but before she could build on her talent she was ordered home to care for a nest of elderly maiden aunts in Glasgow. As the novel opens, she is herself an old lady, living in a "sheltered housing accommodation" colony on the Ayrshire coast. Her stage of dementia means that she is confused—what Scots call "a wee bit wandered"—but still just able to live an independent life with the support of her more "normal" neighbors in Lochranza Court. Anne mixes up living visitors with the long dead. She has a china rabbit that she insists on feeding, and in the first pages she is waking a friend next door and asking for a can opener. The rabbit wants his soup; "he's not had a thing all day."

The friend is Maureen, kind and tender to all except her own family, whom she likes to call ungrateful. ("You give them the best years of your life and then you get the sob stories, the hard-done-to stuff. . . .") Like the other residents, she treasures and protects Anne; they are all fascinated by the jumbled fragments she has brought with her from a life of culture and "educated" sophistication.

But her dementia is gently deepening. At the "Memory Club," a weekly session at which the Lochranza residents talk about their pasts—and are sized up for evidence of mental deteriora-



Andrew O'Hagan at Christie's auction house, London, 2010

tion—Anne doesn't do well. The others are baffled as she talks about a woman she knew who came from France and made rooms and spiders (she evidently means Louise Bourgeois). Later, Maureen and Jackie, the sympathetic woman who runs the place, reluctantly accept that Anne "can't cope in the flat," that she will have to be moved to a "home" where she will lose her independence. Maureen "didn't know what she'd do if Anne ever left Lochranza Court. Maureen recalled when she saw her with a whisky in a crystal tumbler and thought, Good God, here's Anne. A wee lady she is and she knows her own mind."

Anne's loss of memory, it will turn out, is in part protective. There are things she cannot bear to remember but cannot eliminate either, and many of her puzzling remarks make sense when they are seen to derive from "real" events or people or agonies long ago. "Anne was fading away and becoming known at the same time." It's hard to think of any handling of dementia in fiction more delicate and empathetic than O'Hagan's in this novel, accompanied—as it must be—by an equally sensitive account of what dementia does to the sufferer's relatives. Love often gagged by exasperation, pangs of guilty sympathy that so easily release spurts of old child-parent resentment—it's all here. The emotions of O'Hagan's women-on-the-shelf, West of Scotland working-class mothers dumped in sheltered housing, are utterly familiar. Maureen, for instance, is thoroughly happy in Lochranza Court, with its companionship and gossip, but she affects to be

wretched and neglected when she talks to her grown-up children. "You like being upset, don't you?" says Anne to her in a perceptive moment.

In other novels, Andrew O'Hagan has written about how—too often—no love is lost between fathers and sons in the West of Scotland. Here he shows how well he understands the cold wars between mothers and daughters, the buried grievances and jealousies (Why did she love him more than me, who's done so much for her?) that climb to the surface like the smoulder of old Larnarkshire mine fires. O'Hagan's mastery of these relationships is expressed

in his perfect ear for local speech—Lochranza Court is at Saltcoats, in his native territory. It's a region where "Aye, that'll be right!," said with a certain emphasis, means that it won't be.

Anne's daughter Alice, mother of Luke, is an intelligent, unhappy woman with her own grievance against her mother, a grievance whose deepest roots will only become clear when the lights go on at the end of the novel. But remonstrating with Anne is pointless now. Alice's doctor has told her that "the thing with dementia was that it trapped the sufferer in vagueness and spoiled the offspring's hope for a satisfying closure, especially if the relationship had been difficult."

Alice married a soldier who was killed by an IRA bomb in Northern Ireland before the story begins, and their son Luke—clever and sensitive—has joined his father's old regiment in a decision that astonishes everyone. Everyone, that is, except his beloved grandmother Anne, the guide of his boyhood who trains him to see beyond appearances. "'Be true,' she said, 'if not to yourself, then to something more interesting than yourself.'"

The novel moves to Afghanistan, to the Helmand valley where British troops until recently fought, "pacified" Afghans, and died in a campaign they gave up trying to understand. Luke is a captain in the (fictional) Royal Western Fusiliers, a regiment largely recruited from both parts of Ireland. He is in charge of a squad of lively, foul-mouthed young soldiers, most of them in their teens; his company commander is Major Charlie Scullion from County Westmeath, a veteran of Bos-

nia, Kosovo, and Iraq. They are part of an ultimate hearts-and-minds effort, an armored convoy setting off across hostile territory to deliver a new turbine to the Kajaki Dam and restore power to a whole region.

Andrew O'Hagan spent time in Afghanistan during the fighting and more time talking to soldiers in Britain and Ireland about their experiences there. His view of Britain's part in the war in Helmand ("our Vietnam") is that the enterprise was from its inception an utter failure, through no fault of the soldiers themselves, and he has said that "history will see our engagement in Afghanistan as a grand folly that only galvanized the forces of darkness."

His researches in Afghanistan didn't run to being "embedded" in an actual operation with British troops. Nonetheless, he shares with Erich Maria Remarque, among others, the gift for describing in overwhelmingly convincing detail scenes at which he wasn't physically present. Remarque did it for a Nazi concentration camp in *Spark of Life*. O'Hagan does it for the suffocating heat, the weaponry, the sounds and smells inside an armored vehicle on the road through bandit territory, and for scenes of battle as the convoy is ambushed.

Captain Luke Campbell, Anne's grandson, suffers from a growing sense of unreality as the Kajaki Dam operation proceeds. But the unreality of modern war is highly interesting to O'Hagan. The boys under Luke's command go into combat with expectations drawn from video games. Luke reflects:

Younger soldiers often thought they knew the battleground; they saw graphics, screens, solid cover and fuck-off guns you could swap. . . . They saw cheats and levels, badass motherfuckers, kill death ratios, and the kinds of marksmen who jump up after they're dead. Luke knew they all struggled, from time to time, to find the British army as interesting as its international gaming equivalent.

Luke is also worried about what is happening to Major Scullion. He is a contradictory figure, an officer with a reputation for vicious ruthlessness who reads poetry, has learned to speak a little Pashtun, and reveres the ancient past: "a perpetual scholar of green river valleys, an inspector of old travel books." In Afghanistan, he has made a huge effort to believe that the army is there on a civilizing, improving mission: "Scullion had persuaded himself, just about, that creating electricity and irrigating the warlords' poppy fields was a better idea than blasting the population from its caves." But the strain of shielding this conversion against what's blatantly happening in the field is too much: Scullion is cracking up.

When Luke examined his face he saw the eyes of a little counter-assassin from Westmeath. They were fogged with humanitarianism and strict orders, but they were still the eyes of a man who knew what to do in a dark alleyway.



Knew what he used to do, that is—but knows he can't do it anymore. One night the convoy falls into a Taliban ambush, and while the lads are frantically returning fire, Scullion is found crouching and vomiting on the floor of the armored wagon. Luke tries to keep the bad news from the rest of his platoon. But the major goes on pretending that he is in control and in command, and a few days later, during a long halt, he leads Luke and a few others off on a crazy reckless expedition to see an old castle and village nearby.

What then happens in the village forms the peak of the novel. Luke, trained soldier that he is, eyes a group of boys and thinks he sees a mobile phone in a hand. "Luke tried to work out what was going on and he wanted to be friendly but he hated the phone and how they all stood still." But Major Scullion ("Listen, guys. It's cool. This is how we bring peace to these people") won't take heed.

The first shot kills a Scottish lance corporal called Mark (O'Hagan readers will by then have recognized him as the smart, cruel kid who wrecks the life of a naive young priest in his earlier novel *Be Near Me*). Massacre follows, as the soldiers respond with a torrent of fire on the villagers and retreat to their vehicles. They make it back to the convoy, bringing with them Major Scullion in a state of collapse.

When they finally arrive at the Kajaki Dam and fight a full-scale battle to storm the insurgent defenses, Scullion deliberately stumbles out of cover into the enemy mortar barrage. One leg is blown off and the other has to be amputated; back in Britain, he will eventually commit suicide rather than face

"rehabilitation." (The Kajaki convoy really happened. It delivered a crucial third turbine to the dam in 2008, but it seems that Taliban attacks have prevented its installation to this day.)

Afterward, Captain Luke Campbell leaves the army. The massacre in the village has become a public scandal, and an inquiry is being prepared. Luke returns to Scotland with all the alienations and angers that come with reentry into peacetime life after a war. In Glasgow he confronts his mother and her amiable, prosperous second husband, Gordon.

It's the time when Scotland, amazed at its own excitement, is moving toward the 2014 independence referendum. Alice asks him if he isn't proud of Scotland. O'Hagan has a pretty scornful view of Scottish nationalism, and Luke may be thought to be speaking for him when he retorts:

There's no nation, Mum. There's only people surfing the Net.... I love my country for its hills and its inventions, not for its sense of injury, not for its sentimental dream that there's nobody like us.

Down in Saltcoats to see his grandmother again, he gets very drunk, and in an Irish-Catholic pub he finds himself confronting the father of Mark, that lance corporal slain in Helmand:

"He did his best."  
"No, he didn't. He died, son. He died for nothing.... He was a fucking idiot."

He gets no comfort from Charlie Scullion either, when he goes to see

what remains of the major in a Birmingham hospital. Luke tries to thank him, for teaching him things. "Like what?" Scullian asks. "How to put trust in the wrong people? How to become a two-sided man?" The next news of the major to reach Luke will be that he has killed himself.

Back in Lochranza Court, Maureen is preparing lunch for a visit by her children and grandchildren, and "lavishly, early that morning, she began to exert herself making sure the lunch would be difficult. Them with their Edinburgh dinner parties and what have you." Sour-flavored family comedy follows, as Maureen and her family grate on each other for the rest of the day. "Esther... brought one of those sweet Italian loaves full of sultanias that Maureen secretly liked but always said was too rich."

This goes on for pages. It's a family set piece not exactly relevant to the other narratives in the novel, but it's never too long because Maureen is the most beautifully realized personality in *The Illuminations*. The Scots are famous for snatching defeat from the jaws of victory; Maureen, and some other women here, are adept at snatching grievance from the threat of happiness.

Anne, after some near misses, more or less recognizes Luke. "You're the one with the imagination.... A boy and a half." She doesn't realize that she is to be moved out of her little apartment and into a more secure "home" for dementia sufferers. Neither can she take in the news that a museum in Canada has rediscovered her wonderful work of half a century ago and is planning

an exhibition. But she is happy, she tells Luke, and he decides on impulse that he will take her to visit Blackpool, the place to which she always seems so drawn, the place where she was together with Harry, where her darkroom was. Harry, she insists, became a hero during the war, flying secret missions over enemy territory.

When the novel ends, after Blackpool, many things will have been brought to light. Anne's darkroom is found, and a cupboard stacked with marvelous, forgotten prints from the days when Harry stood beside her and developed her negatives. It becomes pathetically clear who Harry was, and what he really did in and out of wartime. In Blackpool, it's revealed why Alice felt so unloved by her mother and so jealous of the love she gave instead to a boy—Alice's own son Luke. And it emerges that there is a terrible reason why Anne cares so tenderly for a porcelain rabbit. An illumination—a car's headlights reflected in a rabbit's shining eyes—brought the best period of her life to an end.

Nothing and nobody in this story is merely what appearance suggests. People—Harry or Maureen, Major Scullion or Luke himself—are sometimes this and sometimes that. They are not exactly "fellows who are two fellows," those dualistic Scottish compounds of man and demon, light and darkness, made familiar by the critical work of the late Karl Miller (to whom this book is dedicated). Instead, they are Charlie Scullion's "two-sided men" or women, different as they turn different sides of themselves toward the illumination. Diane Arbus, briefly mentioned here as a photographer-comrade from Anne's

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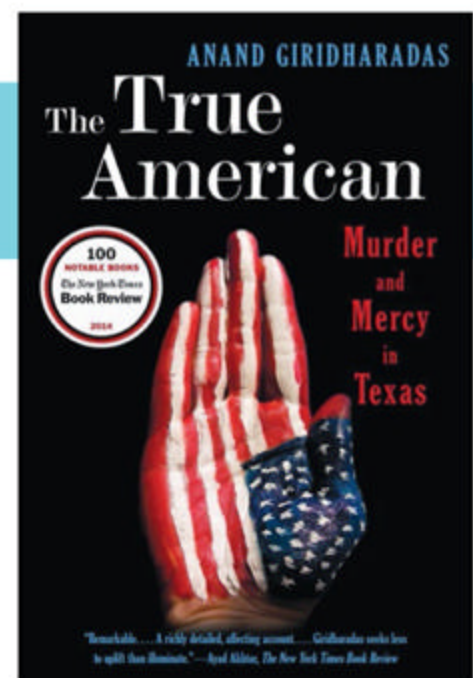
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New York days, once wrote that “our whole guise is like giving a sign to the world to think of us in a certain way but there is a point between what you want people to know about you and what you can’t help people knowing about you.”

Maureen used to find it amazing to talk to Anne. “She had all these pieces in her life that didn’t really fit together....” That could be said about *The Illuminations*, made up as an alternating sequence of three main narratives (Anne’s or Maureen’s at Lochranza Court, Luke’s in Afghanistan), sketches that can almost stand by themselves and sometimes don’t “really fit together.” Anne’s story, though, is partly a suspense tale. There is clearly

a mystery about her life, and just as clearly the novel conveys that it is going to uncover the mystery at some point (there are tiny clues laid along the way, many so slight that they may only jump to notice at a second reading).

The pattern that recurs in Andrew O’Hagan’s story and discreetly pulls it together is unexpected, given his vigilance against sentimental accounts of Scotland. It’s human warmth. Everyone seems to be ready to care for somebody, while frequently reserving the right to moan. Anne cared for her maiden aunts and then took emotional charge of her lonely grandson; Maureen takes motherly charge of Anne; Alice is happiest cleaning Luke’s apartment (while pre-

tending to resent it); the sisters running the Blackpool boardinghouse where Anne used to stay welcome her back in her dementia and nurse her like a lost child. Luke in Helmand is as concerned with protecting his lads as with hunting the enemy. Almost all O’Hagan’s characters, in Saltcoats or Glasgow, assume that they can rely on next-door neighbors for help, sympathy, and news. Lochranza Court, which a conventional writer might have invented as a hell-hole of lonely old folk exploited by callous staff, is a pretty good place to be for most of its residents.

Some people in *The Illuminations*—Harry, Major Scullion—behave badly, even disastrously. None gets away with

it. Everyone comes to Diane Arbus’s point at which what people know about them penetrates what they want people to know about them—their “whole guise.” O’Hagan’s folk are two-sided: the decisions in their heads are one thing and their behavior quite another. And this is held to be common for most of humanity. One of the Blackpool ladies, reflecting on sorry truths about this Harry who was Anne’s lover and Luke’s grandfather, says: “You have to try to understand people like that, people who can’t have the life they want and are always making it up instead or running away.” This novel, which is a fine one, is concerned with both memory and mercy. □

# Our Universities: The Outrageous Reality

Andrew Delbanco

Death may be the great equalizer, but Americans have long believed that during this life “the spread of education would do more than all things else to obliterate factitious distinctions in society.” These words come from Horace Mann, whose goal was to establish primary schooling for all children—no small ambition when he announced it in 1848. Others had already raised their sights higher. As early as 1791, exulting in the egalitarian mood of the new republic, one writer declared it “a scandal to civilized society that part only of the citizens should be sent to colleges and universities.”<sup>1</sup>

How that part has grown is a stirring story. It begins in the colonial period with church-funded scholarships for the sons of poor families. It continued after the Revolution with the founding of public universities such as those of North Carolina and Virginia. In the midst of the Civil War, it was advanced by the Morrill Act, by which Congress set aside federal land for establishing “land-grant” colleges, many of which became institutions of great distinction. By the later nineteenth century, when most colleges still admitted only white men, the cause was advanced again by the creation of new colleges for women and African-Americans.

In the twentieth century the pace quickened. The GI Bill (officially the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944) encouraged veterans to continue their education by giving them money for tuition and living expenses, and helped to drive up college graduation rates among American males from 100,000 per year in 1940 to 300,000 in 1950. Amid cold war anxiety about a “brain race” with the Soviet Union, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 extended benefits such as graduate fellowships to women, and the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 included a “Work-Study” program providing eligible students with campus jobs. When



Members of the Yale Whiffenpoofs, the oldest collegiate a cappella group in the United States, early 1950s

Peter Stackpole/Life Picture Collection/Getty Images

the HEA was reauthorized in 1972, grants for low-income students were added—known today as Pell grants in honor of their principal sponsor, Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island.

Some of these measures were promoted by Republicans, others by Democrats, and all commanded a degree of bipartisan support that in retrospect seems remarkable. Moreover, they were effective. The number of Americans between ages twenty-five and twenty-nine holding a four-year college degree rose from one in twenty in 1940 to one in four by 1977. And if the federal government did much to make this happen, the states did more. Led by California, which virtually guaranteed college access to every high school graduate, many states committed themselves to providing high-quality public education at low cost.

All these strategies had in common one basic motive: to bring college within reach of those for whom it would be otherwise unattainable. In 1817, a North Carolina jurist called for “some just and particular mode of advancing... poor children... from the primary schools to the academies, and from the academies to the university.” A century and a half later, at the signing ceremony for the HEA, President Johnson promised that “a high school senior anywhere in this great land of ours can apply to any college or any university in any of the 50 states and not be turned away because his family is poor.” As Suzanne Mettler writes in her valuable book, *Degrees of Inequality*, “access to college” was becoming “a right of American citizenship.”

Today this story is stalled. At the top of the prestige pyramid, in highly selective colleges like those of the Ivy League, students from the bottom income quartile in our society make up around 5 percent of the enrollments. This meager figure is often explained as the consequence of a regrettable reality: qualified students from disadvantaged backgrounds simply do not exist in significant numbers. But it’s not so. A recent study by Caroline Hoxby of Stanford and Christopher Avery of Harvard shows that the great majority of high-achieving low-income students (those scoring at or above the

## BOOKS DRAWN ON FOR THIS ARTICLE

**Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream**  
by Suzanne Mettler.  
Basic Books, 261 pp., \$27.99

**The Student Loan Mess: How Good Intentions Created a Trillion-Dollar Problem**  
by Joel Best and Eric Best.  
University of California Press, 233 pp., \$26.95

**Financing American Higher Education in the Era of Globalization**  
by William Zumeta, David W. Breneman, Patrick M. Callan, and Joni E. Finney.  
Harvard Education Press, 255 pp., \$29.95 (paper)

**Locus of Authority: The Evolution of Faculty Roles in the Governance of Higher Education**  
by William G. Bowen and Eugene M. Tobin.  
Ithaca/Princeton University Press, 380 pp., \$29.95

**Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality**  
by Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton.  
Harvard University Press, 326 pp., \$35.00

**Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates**  
by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa.  
University of Chicago Press, 246 pp., \$18.00 (paper)

<sup>1</sup>Horace Mann, *Annual Report of the Massachusetts Board of Education* (1848); Robert Coram, *Political Inquiries: to Which Is Added, a Plan for the General Establishment of Schools Throughout the United States* (1791). For additional footnotes, see the Web version of this article at [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com).



ninetieth percentile on standardized tests, and with high school grades of A- or higher) never apply to any selective college, much less to several, as their better-off peers typically do. Their numbers, which Hoxby and Avery estimate at between 25,000 and 35,000 of each year's high school seniors, "are much greater than college admissions staff generally believe," in part because most such students get little if any counseling in high school about the intricate process of applying to a selective college—so they rarely do.

As for the colleges themselves, searching for more qualified low-income students and providing financial aid for them as well as for middle-income students are likely to require compensatory reductions in budgets for competing priorities. Scholarships for needy students can be solicited from donors—but there are "opportunity costs" in the sense that asking alumni to give to the scholarship fund precludes or reduces their giving for other purposes such as faculty chairs or a new dorm or gym. At my own university, which has lately raised billions of dollars in large part to finance a campus expansion, the percentage of college students receiving financial aid has, inexcusably, declined.

Meanwhile, at public institutions, which enroll many more students than private colleges—some 14 million of the roughly 18 million undergraduates who attend nonprofit colleges—subsidies to keep college affordable have also been dropping. Mettler points out that between 1980 and 2010, average spending on higher education slipped from 8 percent to 4 percent of state

budgets. Some states have seen a modest recovery since the Great Recession, but recently the governors of Wisconsin, Louisiana, and Illinois have proposed new cuts.

As a result, the cost of public higher education has shifted markedly from taxpayers to students and their families, in the form of rapidly rising tuition. Between 2000 and 2008, the proportion of family income required for families in the bottom income quintile to cover the average cost of attending a four-year public institution rose from 39 percent to 55 percent. For top-quintile families over that same period, the corresponding rise went from 7 percent to 9 percent.

The story these numbers tell is of a higher education system—public and private—that is reflecting the stratification of our society more than resisting it. Those students who do get to college are distributed, like airline passengers, into distinct classes of service, but with incomparably larger and lingering effects. In 2010, private nonprofit universities, whose students tend to be relatively affluent, spent on average nearly \$50,000 per student—with the wealthiest colleges spending nearly double that amount. At public four-year institutions expenditure per student was \$36,000, while community colleges, where minority and first-generation students are concentrated and which stress vocational training and offer associate rather than bachelor degrees, could spend just \$12,000 per student. Moreover, while the number of Pell grants for needy students has jumped over the last forty years from half a million to more than ten million, a Pell grant in the

1970s covered four fifths of total cost at the average four-year public university. Today it covers less than one third.

These numerical disparities have stark human consequences. Getting through college can be a challenge even for confident students with families on whom they can count to cushion the shock if a parent falls ill or loses a job, or if unexpected expenses arise. For students without such a buffer, college can be a very hard road indeed. Yet in our current system the relation between vulnerability and support is an inverse one. One result is that graduation rates are the same for low-income students with high test scores as for high-income students with low scores. In the United States today, three of every five children from families in the top income quartile earn a bachelor's degree by age twenty-four, while for those in the bottom quartile the rate is one in four (see the figure on page 40).

These are indefensible realities in a nation that claims to believe in equal opportunity. Yet some people look at this picture and say that the whole idea of mass higher education was misguided from the start—that the United States should have emulated instead the European model of test-based tracking by which a select few are chosen early in life for university training that leads to public service or the professions, while the rest are channeled into vocational schools or the trades.

Former secretary of education William Bennett, for instance, believes that "students might be better off investing their tuition money in stocks and bonds rather than in a degree from one of our nation's many colleges." Bennett

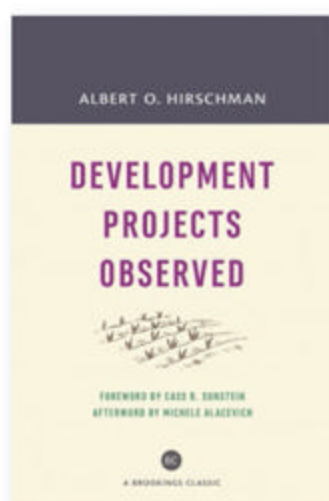
is well known for his love of gambling, but given the proven advantages for the college-educated in the form of higher wages and lower unemployment, anyone taking his advice (never mind that low-income students have no money to invest) would be making a very bad bet.

Critics like Bennett are right, however, to decry what's happening—or not happening—to many students who do get to college. Too few are challenged or given guidance and encouragement. Cheating is common, including at elite private colleges and the so-called public flagships. In a widely noted 2011 book, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, the sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa gave a grim account of college as a place where students are held to low standards in an atmosphere of wasteful frivolity. In their new book, *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates*, they stress that the likeliest victims of "late adolescent meandering" are students from low-income backgrounds who come out of college aimless, demoralized, and with fewer chances than their more affluent peers to recoup lost opportunities. In *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*, Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton speak of "an implicit agreement between the university and students to demand little of each other." And they, too, make the case that students with the fewest family resources have the lowest post-college prospects.

Colleges and universities cannot be expected to solve America's problems

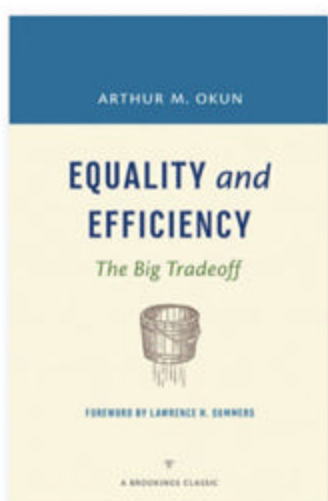
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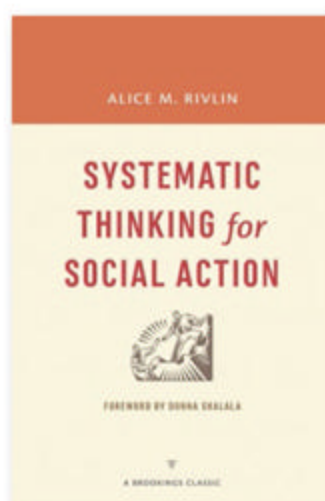
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of inequity. They cannot repair broken families, or make up for learning deficits incurred early in childhood, or “level the playing field” for students with inadequate preparation. But they should be expected to try to mitigate these problems rather than worsen them—and one main reason they are failing to do so is their relentlessly rising cost.

Almost every year, when private colleges announce tuition increases greater than the rate of inflation, pundits cry foul and pin the blame on luxuries (the proverbial “climbing wall”) for pampered students, or on lavish compensation for senior administrators. In 2012, thirty-six private university presidents earned more than a million dollars—some a lot more—and many supplement their salaries with “service” on corporate boards. Especially in straitened times, these excesses are, to say the least, tasteless. They make presidential homilies urging students to put aside selfishness ring hollow. But they contribute only marginally to the college “cost disease.”

A deeper cause is the dual purpose of universities—to create new knowledge while transmitting what is already known. New fields of inquiry arise (pursued in new departments by new faculty), while old fields are rarely relinquished—at least not at the same pace. Thus costs almost always grow faster than savings.

And then there is the nature of teaching itself. Unlike transactions such as banking or shopping, teaching cannot be made more efficient by substituting capital for labor, or, like certain kinds of manufacturing, by economies of scale—at least not without degrading its quality. Some people think that digital technology will soon make it possible to provide good teaching for large numbers of students without a commensurate rise in cost. This remains to be seen. In the meantime, the main strategy for keeping instructional budgets under control has been the replacement of full-time faculty with low-paid adjuncts, many of whom carry heavy course loads, sometimes at several campuses, with little time to devote to individual students. No one except budget managers likes the results.

The problem is compounded when leading members of the faculty are rewarded with reduced teaching obligations—which means that additional faculty must be hired to pick up the slack. And since the prestige of the institution, on which its ability to attract paying students depends, is largely a function of its reputation for “cutting-edge” research, colleges are under constant pressure to construct new laboratories as well as state-of-the-art athletic facilities and performance and social spaces. (The trustees of one university, Auburn, recently approved construction of a new football scoreboard at a cost of \$14 million.) There is a recurring imperative, too, for adding administrative staff in order to provide career and psychological counseling for increasingly stressed students, and to cope with government regulation in every area, from financial compliance to the adjudication of allegations of sexual harassment or assault.

Usually, when the subject of college cost comes up, outrage is focused on the spectacular “sticker price” of highly ranked colleges (at Columbia, where I teach, the published price of

attendance is approaching \$70,000 per year). But in fact with roughly half the students at the highest-priced colleges receiving some financial aid, only about 2 percent of all college students in the United States pay above \$50,000—and they come from families who (though they may not like it) can generally afford it. Meanwhile, in order to attract a sufficient number of students, private colleges of lesser reputation—though not necessarily lesser quality—provide such high discounts on their published price that net tuition dollars (the amount received after financial aid has been awarded) have been virtually flat for years—a trend, in the face of rising costs, that can threaten an institution’s financial sustainability. Sweet Briar College, a small women’s college

than a full scholarship for a needier student.

For these reasons and more, a growing portion of college subsidies is going to students from relatively prosperous families. Many of the beneficiaries are doubtless extremely worthy. But they are students for whom, as William Zumeta and his colleagues write in *Financing American Higher Education in the Era of Globalization*, a scholarship award may make a difference in the decision about which college to attend, but is “less likely to make a difference in whether or not a student attends college” at all.

In short, the United States has a serious structural problem: the cost of college is rising faster than public, institutional, or, for most Americans,

outs,” and consensus grew, even among liberals, that students ought to have some “skin in the game.” In reauthorizing the Higher Education Act in 1972, Congress created the Student Loan Marketing Association (Sallie Mae), modeled on the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae), with the purpose of buying loans from private lenders and “bundling” them for sale in the secondary securities market. The idea was to inject more capital into private banks in order to encourage more lending, including lending to students.

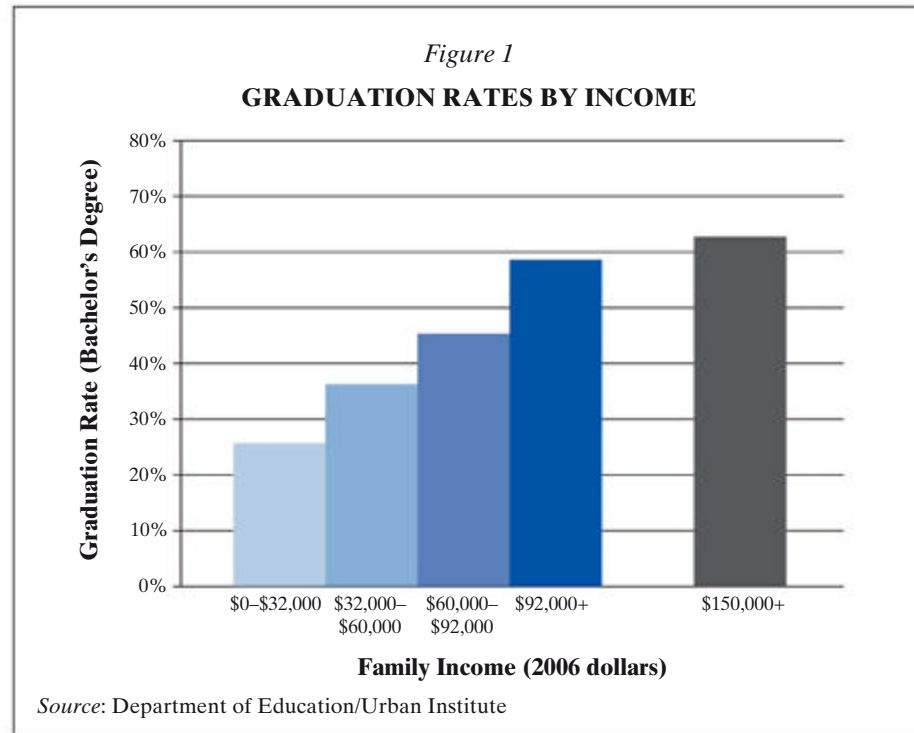
This idea worked very well or very badly, depending on one’s view of what Joel and Eric Best, in their informative history, call *The Student Loan Mess*. Today, some 70 percent of college graduates leave college with debt whose aggregate size—over \$1 trillion—exceeds the national total of credit card debt, with the average student borrower owing around \$30,000. Some people think this is a bubble waiting to burst. Others are less apocalyptic but believe that student debt suppresses young people’s consumer spending (thereby hurting the general economy) and delays home-buying and family formation.

On the other hand, a recent report from the Brookings Institution argues that “the debt picture for the typical college graduate is not so dire,” and that in most cases monthly payments remain reasonably manageable. Whichever side one takes in this debate, there is little doubt that especially for low-income students, indebtedness has become another obstacle to college completion.

When it comes to inflicting debt on low-income students, among the worst offenders are the for-profit “universities,” to which Mettler devotes an excoriating chapter. In the last several decades these institutions have seen explosive growth. With the contraction of state budgets and the changing demographics of college students—many today are adult part-time students, often with families, seeking skills and credentials with which they hope to get or hold a job—the for-profit institutions, which specialize in online and night classes, proliferated and expanded. In 1990 there were 343 for-profit colleges. By 2009 there were 1,199, accounting for nearly 10 percent of all college students, many of them vulnerable and needy—military veterans, single parents, dropouts from traditional institutions who are un- or underemployed.

Mettler tells hair-raising stories about telemarketers who prey on prospective students with misleading promises, and are then rewarded with bonuses or free vacations if they reach enrollment quotas. She describes “an auto repair school in Ohio that was actually run out of a fruit stand” and a beautiful school that tells students to expect annual earnings up to \$250,000. These are small operations, but the largest for-profits such as the University of Phoenix, whose enrollment peaked at nearly 600,000 in 2010, are several times the size of the largest public universities such as Arizona State or Ohio State.

Large or small, fair or fraudulent, the for-profits have a smart business plan: keep costs down by forgoing a campus and offering courses taught by part-time employees, while pulling in maximum revenue in the form of government grants to students and government-guaranteed student loans. In 1991 Congress passed a rule requiring that in order to qualify for accredi-



in rural Virginia with declining enrollments and a discount rate of nearly 60 percent, announced in early March that it would close down after more than a hundred years.

But if there are problems in the private sector, by far the biggest driver of rising tuition has been the lack of economic investment in public institutions. Between 1998 and 2008, tuition rose at four-year private colleges by 33 percent, while at four-year public universities it climbed by 54 percent—a divergence that widened with the Great Recession. And this has happened at a time when most Americans have experienced wage stagnation.

To make matters worse, the trend in dispensing financial aid—both by the states and by colleges themselves—has been moving away from calculations of need toward assessments of “merit” as demonstrated by test scores, extracurricular activities, and the like. Since low-income students are often saddled with family responsibilities and summer and term-time jobs, they tend to have fewer opportunities than their more affluent peers for the sort of entrepreneurship, volunteer work, or studies abroad that may impress admissions officers. Many colleges seek to elevate themselves in the *US News and World Report* rankings, in which test scores count, and there is close correlation between performance on standardized tests and family income. Moreover, a partial “merit” scholarship for an affluent student, which may be enough to persuade that student to enroll, of course costs less

personal resources available to meet it. One ominous sign is that Hispanics and African-Americans, especially young men, are lagging badly behind whites in educational attainment.<sup>2</sup> If these problems are not addressed, we are likely to become, if we are not already, what Mettler calls “a society with caste-like characteristics.”

What is to be done? Some would say that “the market” is already doing a lot. A torrent of private loans is flowing into the gap between costs and subsidies. For most of our history, banks avoided lending to students, since, unlike home mortgages or car loans, student debt is unsecured by real property and borrowers can take years to repay, leaving lenders with low liquidity and high risk of delinquency or default. But in the second half of the twentieth century, government began to make student loans more attractive to private investors. The HEA included a provision by which government would pay the interest while students are still in school, then split the payments after graduation—the first step toward what has grown into a complex system of government-guaranteed private loans.

Loans really began to flow in the 1970s as enthusiasm waned for what conservatives called government “hand-

<sup>2</sup>See Figure 2, on the share of those aged twenty-five to sixty-four with a bachelor’s degree or higher by ethnicity, in the Web version of this article at [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com).



tation, a for-profit must show that at least 15 percent of its income comes from nongovernment sources, but in 1998 the rule was watered down to 10 percent. “Despite being regarded as part of the private sector,” as Mettler puts it, “the for-profits are financed almost entirely by American taxpayers.” For investors in these enterprises, it’s been a great plan. For many if not most of their students, whose debt and default rates are proportionally higher than their counterparts in traditional colleges, it’s been a less happy story.

But the heyday of the for-profits may be over. Under President George W. Bush, a former University of Phoenix lobbyist was appointed assistant secretary for postsecondary education, and regulations, already lax, became even more so. Under President Obama, however, and with more aggressive scrutiny by state attorneys general, government oversight has tightened. Enrollment at the University of Phoenix has dropped by close to two thirds. In 2014, Corinthian Colleges, which once enrolled more than 70,000 students and was taking in \$500 million per year in Pell grants (more, as the higher-education analyst Kevin Carey points out, than the entire University of California system), was dissolved in a settlement with the federal government after being charged with falsifying graduates’ employment data, among other abuses.

These responses to the college cost crisis—the loan flood and the for-profit boom—were never likely to ameliorate educational inequity in the United States. If anything, they have made things worse.

But there are some hopeful signs. During the first Obama administration, Congress disallowed government-subsidized private lending and expanded a program of income-based loan repayment that had begun under President Bush. Caps on monthly repayment obligations have been lowered to 10 percent of the borrower’s income. Loan forgiveness is now available after twenty years, and, for people working in government or nonprofit public service, after ten years. We may be at the start of what Carey calls a “quiet revolution in helping lift the burden of student debt.”

Other promising ideas are in the air—though in the present political climate few seem likely to find bipartisan favor. In his 2015 State of the Union Address, President Obama called for making community colleges free—which conservatives reject as a bill too big for government to pay. Some liberals caution that waiving tuition (already covered for Pell-eligible students) could have the effect of shifting subsidies from truly needy students to others, less constrained, who may choose free community college for the first two years before transferring to a four-year institution.

Many writers on policy, including Mettler, urge that Pell grants should be converted into entitlements, so that, like Social Security benefits, they would provide regular cost-of-living increases rather than depend on periodic congressional reauthorization. The Harvard economist Edward Glaeser has made the interesting suggestion that a portion of Pell funds should be held back from colleges until students who bring in the grants are actually

graduated. His idea is to provide incentives for colleges to help low-income students finish their degrees—an approach something like the way construction loans are paid out in stages as the stipulated work is completed. And University of Michigan economist Susan Dynarski points out that small “nudges”—text messages or phone calls from counselors to at-risk students, reminding them of deadlines and offering practical advice—can make a big difference in college attendance and completion rates.

If we ever return to a functional politics, these and doubtless many other sensible ideas could eventually make improvements on the revenue side of the college affordability problem. On the cost side, however, the burden falls squarely on institutions themselves, since, as Zumeta says, there will be no “expansion of college opportunity without significant improvements in cost effectiveness.”

With this imperative in mind, former presidents William Bowen and Eugene Tobin (Bowen of Princeton, Tobin of Hamilton College) have issued a call, in their book *Locus of Authority*, for reform in academic governance. They think that universities are held back from plausible reforms—experimenting with technologies that could improve efficiency, reducing redundancies in duplicative programs, cutting down on unproductive research—by a certain provincialism whereby faculty tend to think exclusively about what’s good for their department rather than for the whole institution. With a parenthesis that may strike some readers as an afterthought, Bowen and Tobin detect a “strong aversion, especially on the part of faculty (but sometimes on the part of administrators too) to any discussion of cost savings in the case of educational programs.”

This is often true. A related point has been made more bluntly by David Rosen, an English professor who writes that just when we “appear to be entering a new Gilded Age, with institutions of higher learning as willing or unwitting accomplices,” faculty—many of whom call themselves leftists—“seem ready to politicize everything but the immense changes occurring before their very noses.” Decrying inequality is commonplace on many college campuses these days, but the question seldom comes up whether the college itself is helping or hurting through its own admissions and aid practices, and if it’s the latter, what might be done about it.

All in all, despite an emerging recognition that we must change course, the story told in the books under review is a dispiriting one. Mettler attributes the decline of educational opportunity since the 1980s to a failure of “up-keep,” by which she means the failure of government to renew and adapt policies from the past in order to advance their original purposes in the present and future. This strikes me as a generous explanation. The truth may be uglier. Perhaps concern for the poor has shriveled not only among policymakers but in the broader public. Perhaps in our time of focus on the wealthy elite and the shrinking middle class, there is a diminished general will to regard poor Americans as worthy of what are sometimes called “the blessings of American life”—among which the right to education has always been high if not paramount. □

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# The Hard-Won Truth of the North

Colm Tóibín

It is as though certain landscapes, including the Sweden of the writer Stig Dagerman (who died in 1954 when he was thirty-one), have their own sound. Northern landscapes such as his come to us without elaborate description or embellishment, or any display of easy feeling. Light is scarce and so too emotion is rationed, or held within and never made easy. The spirit is wary and the past comes haunting and much is unresolved. Mist, wind, clouds, short days, the proximity of the sea, the quickly changing weather, poverty or the memory of poverty, all suggest a world in which little can be taken for granted. In other places too such as Ireland, Scotland, Canada, Iceland, the northeast coast of the United States, novelists, short-story writers, and poets have mined this sense of scarcity and found an austere poetry, a hard-won truth.

Gray shadows, raked light, a sense of washed color, ghostliness and grief, with an aura of absence and the withholding of easy information, and the presence of stark and austere drama, appear too in the work of certain northern visual artists, such as the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi, the Irish painter Patrick Collins, the Danish filmmaker Carl Theodor Dreyer, or the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman. Some of the icy melancholy in their work appears too in folksongs and in the music of Sibelius.

In the work, say, of John McGahern and Eugene McCabe in Ireland, or George Mackay Brown and Don Paterson in Scotland, or Alistair MacLeod and Alice Munro in Canada, or Hall-dór Laxness and Guðbergur Bergsson in Iceland, or Alice McDermott and Elizabeth Bishop's early life in the northeastern United States (Bishop also spent much of her childhood in Canada), or Tomas Tranströmer and Stig Dagerman in Sweden, language has been pared down to match feeling, and feeling is all the more piercing in its effect, and filled with coiled and gnarled expression, because it is so watched over, so restrained.

A word is a tentative form of control, grammar an enactment of how things stand. But nothing is stable, so words can lift and have resonance, can move out, take in essences as a sponge soaks in water. Thus language is rooted in simple description, and then it blooms or withers; it is suggestive, has some flourishes, or a tone and texture that have odd delights, but it has all sorts of limits and failures. If words are a cry for help, the calm space around them offers a resigned helplessness.

In these northern societies, language is also a way to restrain experience, take it down to a level where it might stay. Language is neither ornament nor exaltation; it is firm and almost desolate in its purpose. Our time on the earth does not give us cause or need to say anything more than is necessary; language is thus a form of calm, modest knowledge or maybe even evasion. The poetry and the prose written in the light of this knowledge or this evasion, or in their shadow, have to be led by clarity, by precise description, by briskness of feeling, by no open displays of anything, least of all a simple response



Stig Dagerman in the Stockholm archipelago, 1951

to experience. The tone implies an acceptance of what is known. The music lives in what is left out. The smallest word, or the holding of breath, can have a fierce, stony power.

In this world, death and disruption, solitude and grief, can take on a large resonance. In novels by John McGahern such as *The Dark* and *Amongst Women*, for example, the death of the mother is barely mentioned, but it haunts the aftermath; the novels are set in an eternal aftermath, a place where the drama has already happened and where characters live in a state of dull and often silent pain. In the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, the death of the poet's father and her mother's incarceration in a mental hospital are not mentioned at all, but they are part of the undertone of the poetry; the poetry's stoic force lies in that undertone.

In McGahern's other books, however, such as his novel *The Leavetaking* and his memoir *All Will Be Well*, death is followed by disruption; the sudden moving of the boy—after his mother's death, from the soft place where he was being brought up to the barracks where

his father worked—is created with considerable tension, the tension between the almost ordinary and the almost epic.

In her prose piece "The Country Mouse," Bishop wrote of her move to Worcester, Massachusetts, from the easygoing, casual beauty of Nova Scotia, where she was living with her maternal grandparents after her mother's incarceration for mental illness:

I had been brought back unconsulted and against my wishes to the house my father had been born in, to be saved from a life of poverty and provincialism. . . . With this surprising extra set of grandparents, until a few weeks ago no more than names, a new life was about to begin. . . . I felt as if I were being kidnapped, even if I wasn't.

It is hard not to feel that in both cases the sudden disruption, the end of the familiar, came as a rare and ambiguous gift to the writers. Despite the pain involved, or precisely because of it, they found not only their subject, but their style.

Hasse Enström

For Stig Dagerman, who was born in 1923, the tension between the life he lived with his grandparents in rural Sweden and the disruption to that life when he was moved to Stockholm to live with his father in 1935 when he was twelve gives him a clarity of vision, a sharp way of remembering and dramatizing. The absences of the people and life he had known made him a master of the art of absences, a master of the nuances of what is missing and cannot be said. What is known is felt more deeply because of the silence surrounding it. The worlds of childhood and even of adulthood are lost worlds, so that every image of them comes with an undertone of pain, danger, even panic. There is no need to spell out what is being felt; it is there in the spaces between the words.

Dagerman was in possession of several tones. In the short time when he flourished as a writer, he was also politically active on the left. He wrote articles, satirical poems, and plays as well as stories and novels. His book *German Autumn*, a collection of reports from Germany in the autumn of 1946, has some of the moral seriousness and ability to handle complex political truths of George Orwell, with a gift for writing sharp and cool declarative sentences that is close to Hemingway. What characterizes the book most is its clear-eyed sympathy for suffering, its ability to feel pity without being naive. The softness of Dagerman's gaze is combined with the controlled clarity of his description and reporting and the intelligence of his analysis.

While his best work derives its expressive force from a simplicity of style, with emotion buried in the rhythm or between the words, there was also a restlessness in Dagerman that makes him hard to pin down. For example, his novel *Island of the Doomed*, written in the summer of 1946, is a kind of fable in which a number of castaways are marooned on a strange island. Here the sentences are snaky and laden with description; the tone is baroque and at times surreal. The subject is his usual one—the nature of the human condition—but whereas the best of his work manages to do this using suggestion and careful shading, *Island of the Doomed* seeks to replace suspicion of language with a delight in its texture that is almost innocent.

In other novels, as well as his stories, Dagerman allows his sentences to depend on their coiled power. In *A Burnt Child*, his penultimate novel, published in 1948, the atmosphere of grief fills the house as the mother dies, leaving the boy and his father alone. But first there has to be a funeral. Dagerman manages the awkward rituals with the same gnarled force and sense of carefully observed detail as John McGahern in his novel *The Leavetaking* and Alice McDermott in *Charming Billy*. Dagerman writes:

Before the cars arrive, they stand around in groups in different parts of the room. Four are standing under the chiming pendulum clock with glasses in their hands. They take sips when no one is looking. They are the widower's relatives

## BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE

### German Autumn

by Stig Dagerman, translated from the Swedish by Robin Fulton Macpherson, with a foreword by Mark Kurlansky. University of Minnesota Press, 120 pp., \$17.95 (paper)

### Island of the Doomed

by Stig Dagerman, translated from the Swedish by Laurie Thompson, with a foreword by J. M. G. Le Clézio. University of Minnesota Press, 338 pp., \$18.95 (paper)

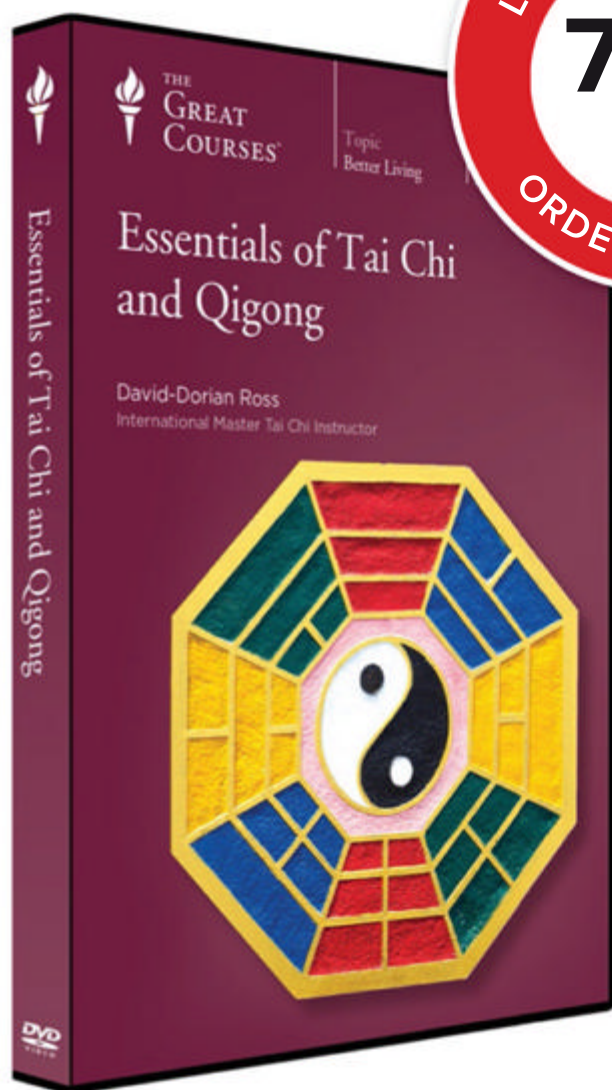
### A Burnt Child

by Stig Dagerman, translated from the Swedish by Benjamin Mier-Cruz, with an introduction by Per Olov Enquist. University of Minnesota Press, 211 pp., \$18.95 (paper)

### Sleet: Selected Stories

by Stig Dagerman, translated from the Swedish by Steven Hartman, with a preface by Alice McDermott. Verba Mundi/Godine, 237 pp., \$17.95 (paper)





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from the country, the ones you only see at weddings and funerals and whose clothes smell like mothballs. They look at the expensive clock. Then at each other. They look at the expensive encyclopedia with its leather binding glistening behind the glass of the bookcase. Then they glance at each other again and take another sip. At once, they are whispering with lips moistened by coffee and wine. They have never cared for the deceased.

It would have been easy then to have made this merely a novel of muted sorrow and sour emotions. But like McGahern in *The Leavetaking* and *The Pornographer*, Dagerman sought to mix grief with eros. He allows the son to begin an affair with his father's girlfriend, thus merging erotic charge and confusion with loss and absence and estrangement.

Love in Dagerman's short stories is filled with fear. The sentences themselves, the paragraphs and the pages are used as a way to mask things; the drama is between slow concealment and stark revelation. The grandparents, as described in Dagerman's "A Child's Memoirs," "did not like people who were fretwork; they wanted one to serve a useful purpose, if only as a hedge stake." They thus became a sort of model for a prose style and a system of narration.

When he was at college in Stockholm, Dagerman heard the news that his beloved grandfather had been murdered, stabbed to death by someone unhinged, and that his grandmother had

died a few weeks later. "The evening I heard about the murder," he wrote,

I went to the City Library and tried to write a poem to the dead man's memory. Nothing came of it but a few pitiful lines which I tore up in shame. But out of that shame, out of that impotence and grief, something was born—something which I believe was the desire to become a writer: that is to say to be able to tell of what it is to mourn, to have been loved, to be left lonely.

For any writer who has known early loss and dislocation, the task is to find metaphors, to work out ways of dealing with experience that are indirect to begin with, and then slowly move toward the original wound by something lurking in the prose. Writing becomes a skin-tight camouflage; the camouflage then carries with it traces of the original impulse to write and to make the writing matter to the reader, traces that gradually become more rich with truth and dense with feeling than the original impulse itself.

Thus in stories such as "To Kill a Child," "In Grandmother's House," and "The Surprise," Dagerman found ways of suggesting his own story while telling it more richly and mysteriously. In other stories of childhood, or that use a child observer, he uses a tone close to that in the early stories of James Joyce's *Dubliners*, which Joyce described to his publisher as a tone of "scrupulous meanness." No flourishes, no high drama. Each sentence etched on the page as each observation or sensation is etched on the child's mind.

Some of Dagerman's other stories, such as "Sleet," are masterpieces of their kind. In that story, the sense of expectation is held throughout as the family in the Swedish countryside waits for their relative who has come from America, but all the time there is another melody playing in the story, which can fade and become dominant and fade. This melody gives us the family itself, the grandfather, the mother, the child's own brittle, watchful consciousness. The detail is worked with what seems like an awestruck ease. After the grandfather has been shaved, for example, so that he will look good for his sister, "there's a red scratch on his cheek that sticks out like a thin mouth, but the rest of him is pure white." He is wearing the suit he wore at his wife's funeral.

In a story like this a single word can carry an immense poetic weight. The word "sleet" is not a symbol for anything. It is itself, sleet, a part of the weather. Where it is placed in the story, and how it is repeated, however, allow it to hit the reader's nervous system as an example of strangeness, of some moment that lodged in the mind with a sort of shivering intensity. A set of resonant feelings came darting toward the reader in a single word.

Slowly, also, another melody, a more plaintive one, is playing, and it is the story of an absence as well as an arrival. In the first section of the story, it is clear that the child has no father and that this is a raw and uneasy matter in the house. The visitor then will exacerbate the absence toward the end of the story by asking baldly: "Are you the little boy without a father?" This then is allowed to emerge as the dominant theme; it has been there all along as undertone.

Dagerman's genius was to hide it from us while other things were happening, all the more urgently to involve us in the emotion around it. He can also evoke such emotion in a single sentence. He writes in "A Child's Memoirs": "Everyone else in the world had parents: I had only grandparents." The stark simplicity of this, coming at the end of a paragraph where he has written about waiting for his mother to come and her failure ever to do so, manages something that can normally be only achieved in music. It involves a lowering of the tone, allowing a single instrument to emerge and giving that single instrument a melody to play that seems both natural and essential, something that has always been there now raised up, standing alone, pitiless and filled with stony pity.

As with Joyce's *Dubliners*, innocence gives way to experience. Dagerman's rural stories are filled with loss, but also with a strange stability. Once the city and sexuality enter the frame, the stability is replaced by chaos and

confusion, but the sensibility remains as raw as earlier, as watchful, as ready to notice, and as filled with an effort to make sense of things. In stories such as "The Games of Night," "Men of Character," and "Bon Soir," there is a drama around love and treachery, sexual desire and personal isolation, but there is also another drama around the art of noticing and the poetics of knowing. What is half known takes on power in these dark stories, in which scenes and characters are filled with watchfulness and guilt.

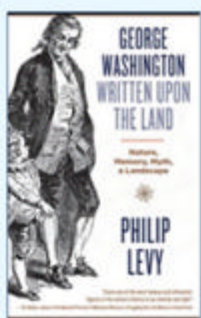
In these stories, domestic life is fraught and filled with anguish. "The Games of Night," for example, inhabits the mind of a young boy, an only child, as he moves between dream and reality. His father is drinking; his mother needs money. The voice is stark, direct, with statement of fact, or what seems like fact, followed by further statement. The story opens: "Sometimes at night as his mother cries in her room, and only a clattering of unfamiliar footsteps echoes in the stairwell, Håkan plays a little game to keep from crying himself." Dagerman avoids easy flourishes; he holds a tone with fierce control in order to release an undertone.

In "Men of Character," the teacher's wife in a small community is having an affair with their lodger, a forester. Dagerman has a way of making his narrative perspective seem like a camera. We see what the characters do, we hear what they say. Their interior life is, for the most part, conveyed all the more powerfully by using implication rather than explanation and by the use of a close-up shot, and then moving the camera back to capture a scene from a doorway. As in "The Games of Night," Dagerman knows how to use silence, stillness, the half-said, the understated in order to dramatize states of deep, raw feeling. His emotional seasons are autumn and winter. Short days, cold air, the nervous glance, the glimpse, the night without sleep, are the bricks with which he builds his fictional houses filled with shadows and unresolved pain, but filled also with a stark tenderness, at times a grim humor, in the face of uneasiness and loss.

No one can be trusted. Nonetheless, there is something in these stories that, because they tell no more than they know, because they offer no false drama or any moral message, can be trusted in full. It suggests a great deal more with a fierce sly grace because there is a pure belief in the power of suggestion itself, as well as the power of imagination. What is left out, or hidden between words or in the rhythm of sentences, has been chosen with such care by Dagerman, chosen to have as much afterglow as glow, to have as much undercurrent as current, and thus remain in the mind and memory all the more completely.

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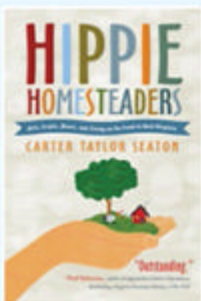
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# A Blind Lawyer vs. Blind Chinese Power

Evan Osnos

**The Barefoot Lawyer:  
A Blind Man's Fight for Justice  
and Freedom in China**  
by Chen Guangcheng.  
Henry Holt, 330 pp., \$30.00

In early 2012, Chen Guangcheng, a self-taught lawyer who had been blind since infancy, lived with his wife and two children in the village of Dongshigu, where he'd been raised, on the eastern edge of the North China plain. They were not there by choice. For a little over a decade, Chen had waged a public campaign against corruption, pollution, forced abortion, and other abuses of power. Officials had responded with escalating punishments. After he completed a four-year jail sentence on a charge of "obstructing traffic," Chen and his family were confined to his ancestral home in a form of undeclared and indefinite house arrest. The local government covered the windows with metal sheeting and stationed guards around the building. Phones, computers, and televisions were forbidden. When one of Chen's brothers died, Chen was permitted to send only his seven-year-old daughter to mourn him. To send back a message, another brother resorted to whispering to the daughter while they knelt beside the grave.

In early 2011 Chen and his wife, Yuan Weijing, made a video pleading for help that was smuggled out of China; afterward, guards beat Yuan, breaking her ribs. A year later, when guards roughed up his mother, who was seventy-seven, Chen reached a decision—"my anger congealed into a kind of desperate resolve," he writes in *The Barefoot Lawyer*, a fierce memoir of rural life and dissent. "I would escape, or try to escape, and I would do it soon." The architect of his jailbreak would be his wife. For weeks, she visited their roof, pretending to be drying corn or hanging laundry; she was mapping out each footstep that he would take to climb into an adjoining yard. She cleared the leaves that would crackle underfoot, she counted the walls that he would scale, and she monitored the habits of the guards. Finally, she studied the lunar calendar for a *chengri*—an auspicious day: April 20.

At night the village was too quiet for an escape; Chen could hear the beeping of the guards' cell phones as they played games. So he departed in daylight: over the roof, creeping from backyard to backyard, hiding for hours in a goat pen while his wife and daughter carried on a charade of normalcy. For nearly four decades, Chen had navigated his way in the village without sight, using, as he puts it, "the patterns of sounds, the mix of smells, the organization of space." He could estimate the time by noting which village roosters cried at which hour of the day. He had a system for avoiding obstacles without use of a cane:

By making just the slightest *shhhh* sound, no louder than a light wind in a pine tree, I could determine

from the returning sound waves what was in front of me, whether large object or wall, forest or field.

Chen's book includes occasional italicized passages written from his wife's perspective, and the portrait emerges of a full and formidable partner in Chen's life. Of her husband's escape, she writes:

I usually don't believe in luck or God or any higher power, but on

famine following the Great Leap Forward, partly by eating bark and grass. Chen, the youngest of five sons, was known as Little Five. (As a teenager, he chose the given name Cheng, meaning "sincere.") When he was five months old he developed a fever but the family lacked the two yuan needed to visit a hospital. The Cultural Revolution was raging and China's economy was a wreck. After the infant cried non-stop for two days, his mother found blue masses on his eyes. "Sometimes I



The blind lawyer Chen Guangcheng with his wife, Yuan Weijing, in New York City, shortly after fleeing China, May 2012

that day I believed in anything that might help us. As the afternoon went on, I returned to the kitchen several times to pray to the image of the Kitchen God on the wall.

By the following evening, Chen was out of his village and en route to Beijing, where he sought refuge in the US embassy, setting off one of the most unusual crises in diplomatic history. He and his family later settled in America.

I lived in China from 2005 to 2013 and watched Chen emerge as an activist. We spoke occasionally by phone and I wrote about his activities. For all of his audacity, and the sheer physical improbability of his story, I always regarded his experience as that of an outlier, with limited lessons for understanding China's future. But *The Barefoot Lawyer* compels us to consider an alternative reading. The details of how, exactly, a man who might never have left the village of his birth came to see the need to confront the Chinese state says much about him but no less about his country. Chen may turn out to be less of an aberration in the political forces shaping modern China than an embodiment of them.

When Chen was born in November 1971, his family was very poor, which is to say, no more or less poor than their neighbors in rural Shandong province. His father's family had survived the

like to say that I was blinded by communism—or, more specifically, a wave of unrealistic, empty propaganda that swept the country continually for decades," Chen writes. For years, the family searched for a diagnosis or a treatment—one doctor said it was keratitis, another said glaucoma—but they never found an answer.

*The Barefoot Lawyer* opens with a brisk account of Chen's escape and then goes back in time to describe his path to activism. For many reasons, it was not an easy book to produce. In conversation, Chen, who speaks little English, makes esoteric references to Chinese literature and philosophy. For this project he had the help of collaborators, including his wife, their translator, their editor, and two unnamed writers, and the result is a highly readable and disciplined narrative of a life unto itself. He goes a long way toward answering the questions that have puzzled many who have followed the story of Chen's life: Why did he take the risk? How did he come to believe that he should, and could, be a legal activist? What, in the end, was he seeking?

In Chen's telling, his politics emerged from a combustible mix of deprivation and opportunity. Chen's parents, like many in their generation in China, wanted nothing to do with questioning the policies of the Communist Party. They had barely survived Mao's campaigns, and they were desperate to live quietly, with as much prosperity as fate

would allow. Chen grew up under different circumstances. In the late 1970s, after the Cultural Revolution, China turned its focus to economic development, and Chen's generation grew up largely spared the cycles of mass mania that had traumatized his parents. His brothers didn't seem to mind that he couldn't see, and they enlisted him in village mischief: trapping animals, climbing trees, building dangerous toys and tools. When he was fourteen, he made a pistol out of bicycle parts and gunpowder, and accidentally shot himself in the leg.

If adventure gave Chen confidence that his body was not destiny, another theme—cruelty—stirred in him a sense of righteous anger. When other children entertained themselves by hitting him and running away, he writes about one of them, "I waited for the kid to strike again; when I heard him coming, I would grab him and throttle him back." He did not blame the children; he blamed the adults who did not intervene. As he puts it, "these people seemed unconcerned with how I might feel and saw no problem with the way I was treated." When the village acquired its first television, he squeezed into the crowd to experience it, and others said that his seat should go to a person who could see. "But this was blatant prejudice," he writes, "and at the time I had no way of entering into a dialogue with people about it. The only thing I knew to do was to remain silent."

Several of the most revealing sections of *The Barefoot Lawyer* are offhand observations about life with a disability in a rural village. At one point during his escape, Chen made sure to avoid being spotted by a neighbor's mentally ill son who lived behind bars in a nearby yard. "He had been locked up that way for as long as I could remember, and he bayed from morning until night for his mother," Chen writes, with a bluntness that suggests not a lack of sympathy, but a sense that life is cruel.

As he became older, his blindness not only limited his prospects but also became the source of an alternative understanding of the world. He was not allowed to attend the local school, so his father read to him from China's classics—full of heroic bandits, noble sages, and unjust rulers. "Though I lacked the conventional education of my peers, I also avoided the propaganda," Chen writes. For centuries, China had relied on rituals, models, and institutions to control wayward ideas, a process that the philosopher Xunzi, in the third century BC, compared to steam and pressure straightening a warped slab of wood. But Chen was excluded from many activities, so instead of the Party-approved curriculum, "my father's tales became my foundational texts in everything from morality to history and literature." Later, he received a radio, which exposed him to a vast range of programming—including uncensored reports

Shannon Stapleton/Reuters



from Hong Kong and Taiwan—that his peers rarely encountered.

When he was eighteen, Chen was finally allowed to go to school; he learned braille and emerged as an inveterate reformer. In his first year, he became a student representative and pushed administrators to provide more water to the dormitories for showers; he went on to demand the right to leave campus independently, and more funding for the music program. Outside of school, he developed an interest in the law and forced bus companies to observe rules allowing the disabled to ride for free. His activism sprang not from an abstract political agenda but from his certainty that life should be better. When a factory polluted the river near his village, Chen organized the installation of a safe water supply. The mayor urged Chen to speak, and he offered a single sentence: “I hope we can all achieve a better standard of living!”

In the next decade, however, Chen’s activism carried him beyond an amicable relationship with his government. He launched a much-publicized campaign to stop local officials from conducting forced abortions and sterilizations under the one-child policy. His motivation was partly personal: “Both my brother and his wife were forcibly sterilized,” he writes, and Chen and his wife were expecting a second child. The fear that they, too, might be assaulted radicalized him. Chinese law allowed self-taught “barefoot lawyers” to bring cases before the courts, and Chen filed class-action lawsuits that attracted growing concern from the Communist Party, which is acutely wary of organized political action. He writes, “I had no degree or law license to take away and, thus, had less to fear—or so I thought.”

One of the most distinctive features of Chen’s life as a dissident is poverty. Many of China’s most prominent political critics came from comfortable or elite backgrounds: the artist Ai Weiwei is the son of Ai Qing, one of the Communist Party’s most celebrated poets, and the artist also credited his unorthodox thinking, in part, to a decade that he spent going to galleries in Manhattan; the blogger Han Han grew up on the outskirts of Shanghai, with middle-class motivations—the pursuit of girls, sports cars, and fame—which helps explain his success, because others could see themselves in him.

Chen, by contrast, was not raised to see himself as a man of history. He reached that conclusion on his own, a fact that suggests an answer to one of the puzzles about Chen’s ordeal: Why did the Communist Party, the world’s most expansive and powerful political organization, sacrifice so much of its international image in order to silence one cantankerous and blind lawyer in a village? Or, for that matter, why bother to jail the writer Liu Xiaobo, who won the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, sentencing him to serve eleven years for “incitement to subvert state power”? Outsiders often presume that such actions are about foreign relations—that the Party, in effect, calculates that the embarrassment it will suffer abroad, by allowing these figures to publish and protest at will, is greater than any further harm done to its reputation by adding another name or two to the list of political prisoners around the world.

But it’s becoming clear that the Party sees Chen, and others like him, as a more fundamental threat. Though Chinese leaders talk about pursuing “soft power” and have invested in public relations efforts, including funding Confucius Institutes and ads on billboards in Times Square, the Party’s broader actions indicate that it now worries less about its image abroad than about its survival at home. During the last fifteen years, Chinese leaders have denounced the “color revolutions” that swept through Eastern Europe and the tides of unrest in Tibet in 2008, in Xinjiang in 2009, and in Hong Kong in 2014. They are especially wary of the combination of dramatic personal stories and new technology. In Egypt, online videos about a twenty-eight-year-old man who was beaten to death



Chen Guangcheng’s mother, Wang Jinxiang, at their house in the village of Dongshigu, Shandong province, after he reached the United States with his wife and children, June 2012

by police alerted Egyptians to human rights organizations’ campaigns against police abuse, setting off demonstrations that eventually undermined the government.

One of the most common mistakes that outside observers make about China is assuming that ordinary Chinese people remain so focused on earning a living, so relieved to be free of Mao’s campaigns, that they have no desire to involve themselves in political questions. This was true enough a decade ago. But in today’s countryside, away from new skylines and new infrastructure, conversations almost inevitably turn to the frustration over corruption, petty tyranny, and the unfair distribution of opportunity. To presume that the Chinese people are as mesmerized by their nation’s economic transformation as foreigners are is to misjudge the mood as thoroughly as people misjudged Chen Guangcheng’s conception of an adequate life. A local official once visited him under house arrest, and Chen explained the violations of his rights, to which the official responded: “But you can’t see anyway.... As long as people give you enough to eat, what do you want with going out and doing things?”

The disconnect between Chen’s expectations of life and what others imagined for him is at the core of the final, and most surprising, dispute in his story. After he escaped to Beijing, the US embassy agreed to shelter him as a matter of humanitarian concern. Inside the American compound, Chen was grateful for medical attention—he had broken his foot during his escape—and the assurances of support.

In jail and house arrest, his treatment had often improved when outsiders expressed concern about his case. (“Little do foreigners know how much impact they can have when they exert some of their influence,” he writes.) But he had inadvertently entered the embassy at a moment that worked against him. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was about to arrive in Beijing for high-level strategic and economic talks, and both sides worried that the drama around Chen’s case would damage relations between the US and China.

For days, American and Chinese officials negotiated a plan for Chen’s future. They reached a deal that would remove him and his family from house arrest and allow him to study at a Chinese university, and then at New York University’s Shanghai campus. But

Chen was dispirited; he believed the Americans were naive to trust those terms and, worse, eager to see him leave the embassy. “They kept encouraging me, as if I were a child, to see just how beneficial the Chinese terms were,” he writes, adding, “I wondered if the Americans fully understood the power Chinese officials have over ordinary citizens.” Some of Chen’s expectations were grandiose—“I had requested numerous times to meet with China’s top leaders, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao,” he recalls—but ultimately his suspicion of the deal was justified: hours after Chen agreed to be moved to a Chinese hospital, authorities barred diplomats and journalists from reaching him. The US ultimately scrapped the deal and arranged for him and his family to move to America.

The strength of *The Barefoot Lawyer*, its intimate account of his feelings over the years, is also its limitation. Chen does not claim to offer a portrait of China but the sketch that emerges from his ordeal could be misread, in isolation, as a descendant of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, which conveyed the image of Soviet brutality and decay. China today is not the Soviet Union; it is defined by duality, by the tension between growth and modernization on the one hand, and, on the other, corruption and injustice. In that sense, Chen’s work has more in common with *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair’s novel of American industrialization, published in 1906, which exposed the exploitation of workers and the corruption of institutions.

Because Chen’s book focuses so closely and effectively on his story, it leaves one curious about the people he encounters on the Party’s side. There are intriguing glimpses of sympathetic guards and officials; in a remarkable scene, the judge who sent Chen to prison on ludicrous charges visits him behind bars and says, “I personally was not against you, but there was nothing I could do.” Chen writes, “I asked him why in the world he had given me such an inflated sentence; he replied by reminding me that the court had to listen to party orders.”

Whose orders? Was Chen’s ordeal dictated by Beijing, as he suspects, or was it a ham-fisted improvisation by provincial and local leaders? After Chen’s escape, were police truly unable to stop him from reaching US diplomats? Or, as some have speculated, did one faction of the Party hesitate to stop him in order to embarrass a rival faction? For the moment, the mysteries remain. China today has the world’s most extensive surveillance apparatus, but there is as yet no Chinese heir to *The Lives of Others*, the artful 2006 German film about a Stasi agent’s motives and anxieties. Those in power in China today have a case to make, a rationale, a balancing of needs, but they seclude themselves within the propaganda system, out of reach of journalists and the public, so their thinking remains unreal to us.

*The Barefoot Lawyer* ends on May 19, 2012, the day that Chen and his family reached the United States for an academic fellowship at NYU. Since then, Chen has faced additional dramas. After more than a year at NYU, he accused the university of forcing him out under pressure from Beijing, which the school denied. In search of a new home, he accepted fellowships from conservative Christian activists who had backed him because of his work against forced abortion. In an effort to maintain political harmony, he also became an adviser to the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice, a liberal organization. Like other Chinese exiles before him—Liu Binyan, Fang Lizhi, Wei Jingsheng—Chen faces a harder question than simply his partisan affiliation. How will he remain relevant outside his country?

Reading his story today, one is struck by the fact that the Chinese government is not relaxing its grip over activists like him; it is tightening up. Several of the people he mentions—including his lawyer Xu Zhiyong and Guo Yushan, an NGO organizer who helped him to travel secretly from the village to Beijing—are now in jail, as part of a sweeping crackdown on dissent that human rights advocates consider the most severe in two decades. From afar, it is impossible not to wonder why anyone takes the risks that Chen and so many others accept in pursuit of greater rights and legal protections. But Chen sees it differently. Like others of his generation, and those that will follow, he came of age in a country of rising expectations and individual awareness of repression. His parents saw no choice but to “eat bitterness,” as the old Chinese expression puts it. But Chen never learned to suffer in silence. “I had always argued that there’s nothing in the world that can’t be changed,” he writes. “If you believe otherwise, I held, either you’re not working hard enough or you haven’t yet found the right tool.” □



# The King of the Insomniacs

Phillip Lopate

## The Lunatic

by Charles Simic.  
Ecco, 84 pp., \$22.99

## The Life of Images: Selected Prose

by Charles Simic.  
Ecco, 338 pp., \$27.99

Charles Simic is one of our most celebrated living poets. He has won a Pulitzer, a MacArthur Fellowship, the Wallace Stevens award, the Frost Medal, the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award, and served as the US poet laureate. What's striking is that his distinctive poetic style continues to feel modest, seemingly casual, with a built-in shrug of bemused puzzlement before life's anomalies. Most of the time it's a good-humored shrug, though there are moments when ferocity breaks in, along with an Eastern European recognition of historical tragedy, as befits "someone like me who had the unenviable luck of being bombed by both the Nazis and the Allies."

With the passing of Mark Strand, Galway Kinnell, Kenneth Koch, and Maxine Kumin, Charles Simic is one of the last remaining members of that marvelous generation of writers born before 1940 who did so much to reinvigorate American poetry. *The Lunatic*, his newest poetry collection, is his thirty-sixth. Simultaneously, Ecco, his publisher, has brought out *The Life of Images: Selected Prose*, which contains the cream of his six previous prose collections, and confirms that he is not only one of our finest poets, but a singularly engaging, eminently sane American essayist.

It's through his nonfiction that we learn the basic facts about Simic's life. Born in 1938, he grew up in Belgrade during the war. "I'm also a child of History. I've seen tanks, piles of corpses, and people strung from lampposts with my own eyes." Still, he regarded his childhood as happy, being too young to imagine an alternative. It was when the war ended that things got really tough: food was scarce, and people sold whatever they could for edibles. In the course of the war and its aftermath, his father was separated from the family, and his mother tried to sneak Charles and his brother into Austria to rejoin him. When stopped by a British colonel who demanded to see their passports, "my mother replied that had we had passports, we would have taken a sleeping car." They were sent back to Belgrade, and only when Charles turned sixteen, in 1954, were they able to emigrate to the United States, settling in Chicago.

Simic portrays his father, from whom he had been separated for ten years, with tender affection as his model: a tolerant, easygoing man who loved good food, music, pretty women, and philosophy, who had no use for organized religion but liked to visit houses of worship. (He is less kind to his mother, who comes across as something of a diva and a hypochondriac.) When his parents broke up Simic left home, taking night classes at the University of Chicago while working days at the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

He was initially drawn to Surrealism and the collages of Max Ernst. A

lifelong insomniac, he read philosophy at night, searching for the larger, hidden meanings of existence. He was fond of Wittgenstein's statement "It is not 'how' things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists."

One winter day in the Chicago El, he was hit like a bolt with the incredible fact that the world existed, and he in it. Moving to New York City, where he lived in a fleabag hotel, he finished college, staying up nights listening to the blues and reading philosophy, which

the physical world. "Awe is my religion, and mystery is its church," he declares. In his poetry, this sometimes leads to an overuse of perplexity bordering on the faux-naïf. One of the ways he invites the mysterious is by opening himself to chance, that favorite tactic of the Surrealists. "Others pray to God; I pray to chance to show me the way out of this prison I call myself."

Again playing the amateur, he says that in writing poetry

one has, for the most part, no idea of what one is doing. Words make



Charles Simic, New York City, May 1996; photograph by Jill Kremenitz

now began to merge with a newfound interest in poetry:

The pleasures of philosophy are the pleasures of reduction—the epiphanies of hinting in a few words at complex matters. Both poetry and philosophy, for instance, are concerned with Being. What is a lyric poem, one might say, but the recreation of the experience of Being. In both cases, the need to get it down to its essentials, to say the unsayable and let the truth of Being shine through.

Here we come to one of the paradoxes in these essays: on the one hand, a dedication to the intellect at its most articulate, to reading all the books in the library, as he says "children of immigrants," insecure and playing catch-up, are wont to do; and on the other, an insistence on all that remains "unsayable"—on the failure of language to do justice to "moments of heightened consciousness." Arguing with a friend who insisted that "what cannot be said, cannot be thought" . . . I blurted out something about silence being the language of consciousness. . . . It is characteristic of Simic to portray himself as a clumsy thinker rather than a trained intellectual, blurting out this hasty koan. He quotes approvingly Gilbert Sorrentino's dictum that "at the moment the writer realizes he has no ideas he has become an artist."

What, then, should replace thinking and ideas? A cultivation of awe. Admitting that he does not believe in God, Simic nevertheless recognizes a spiritual pull to find hidden meaning in

love on the page like flies in the summer heat and the poet is merely the bemused spectator. The poem is as much the result of chance as of intention. Probably more so.

It is a commonplace for poets to say, "The poem is smarter than I am. Now I go where it wants to go." That may be true; but at the same time, Simic is too lucid and accessible, too much the poetic craftsman, to let chance take over completely. "My entire practice . . . consists of submitting to chance only to cheat on it." He recognizes that his conscious mind is at the helm: "The reputation of the unconscious as the endless source of poetry is over-rated."

Further complicating his aesthetic, Simic says that "all genuine poetry in my view is antipoetry." While he disdains to elaborate on that aphorism, elsewhere he quotes Nicanor Parra, the wonderful Chilean author of *Poems and Antipoems*. We might also recall Wallace Stevens's comment in his preface to the *Collected Poems* by William Carlos Williams: "The anti-poetic is that truth, that reality to which all of us are forever fleeing." For Simic, the anti-poetic also meant submitting to the advice of the Chicago working-class intellectuals he met:

I was all ready to put on English tweeds with leather elbow patches and smoke a pipe, but they wouldn't let me: "Remember where you came from, kid," they reminded me again and again.

There's no question they had me figured out. Thanks to them, I failed in my natural impulse to become a phony.

Simic's poetic method has remained fairly consistent over the last forty years. He has written: "My effort to understand is a perpetual circling around a few obsessive images." His language is rather simple and conversational rather than densely textured, and it carries a faint European accent. One might be tempted to surmise that, as an immigrant for whom English is a second language, he was making do with a bare, spare diction—though switching to English had the opposite effect on Conrad and Nabokov, driving them toward verbal baroque. Moreover, Simic's prose displays a larger lexicon and more varied syntax, so we must conclude that the choice of a stripped-down manner in poetry is highly intentional. If "words are impoverishments" to begin with, as he asserts, why show off a big vocabulary? The common speech approach also indicates a certain allegiance to the William Carlos Williams pole of modern American poetry.

Simic's poems are noted for their wry, forlorn tone of wonder at the everyday, and their delightful flashes of humor, as well as the occasional bizarre turn: the amiable quotidian may suddenly darken, bearing witness to some cruelty or violence. While not strictly metrical, they exhibit a remarkable ear for the rhythmic beats of a line, so that even when the language verges on the prosy, we never lose awareness that we are reading a poem. His stanzas are constructed tightly, with lines around the same length and a flow unobtrusively mingling end stops and enjambments.

Though Simic has compared Emily Dickinson's poems to Chinese boxes, his interest in Joseph Cornell would seem to point to that rectangular inspiration. Cornell (however much he might have resisted the Surrealist label) brought together uncanny combinations in close proximity. Simic compares a Cornell box to

a place where the inner and the outer realities meet on a small stage. . . . The boxes actually make me think of poems at their most hermetic. To engage imaginatively with one of them is like contemplating the maze of metaphors on some Symbolist poet's chessboard. The ideal box is like an unsolvable chess problem in which only a few figures remain after a long intricate game whose solution now seems both within the next move or two and forever beyond reach.

Simic's own tantalizing poetic compositions, usually running between eight and sixteen thin-columned lines, with a handful of images left on board, are tightly mitred boxes that seem both transparent in their meaning yet impossible to prise open completely.

In his latest collection, *The Lunatic*, its title aside, there is less of the mad or grotesque, and more of a quiet waiting for the end. The customary situation finds the poet lying in bed, unable to sleep, "the uncrowned king of the insomniacs." His night thoughts flitter about, taking him past a set of imagined scenes, often ending in the



graveyard. He begins one poem, "Scribbled in the Dark":

*Sat up  
Like a firecracker  
In bed,*

*Startled  
By the thought  
Of my death.*

There is nothing particularly morbid about these nocturnes, simply the recognition of what may likely befall an elderly author. Another poem ends:

*I hear a pack of cards being  
shuffled,  
But when I look back startled,  
There's only a moth on a window  
screen,  
Its mind like mine too wired to  
sleep.*

He and the moth are locked together in insomniac jitters: the very threadbare-ness of the incident provides the comedy. Other poems seem to spring from the lassitude of summer afternoons' interrupted naps. Desire rarely intrudes on the present, but it does visit, as with Cavafy, in the form of retrieved memories:

#### STORIES

*Because all things write their own  
stories  
No matter how humble  
The world is a great big book  
Open to a different page,  
Depending on the hour of the day,*

*Where you may read, if you so  
desire,  
The story of a ray of sunlight  
In the silence of the afternoon,  
How it found a long-lost button  
Under some chair in the corner,*

*A teeny black one that belonged  
On the back of her black dress  
She once asked you to button,  
While you kept kissing her neck  
And groped for her breasts.*

A fairly contained set of words recurs in these seventy poems: light, leaf, thought, trees, night, fleas, bird, mirror, cards, graveyard, snow, pigeons, breasts, fireworks, old man, old woman. Simic shuffles these terms as though following some Surrealist game of chance, with the result that the book has a taut, inward-revolving unity. It may seem as though he's writing the same poem over and over, but then a sudden twist will take it to a startling place:

#### SO EARLY IN THE MORNING

*It pains me to see an old woman  
fret over  
A few small coins outside a  
grocery store—  
How swiftly I forget her as my  
own grief  
Finds me again—a friend at  
death's door  
And the memory of the night we  
spent together.*

*I had so much love in my heart  
afterward,  
I could have run into the street  
naked*

*Confident anyone I met would  
understand  
My madness and my need to tell  
them  
About life being both cruel and  
beautiful,*

*But I did not—despite the over-  
whelming evidence:  
A crow bent over a dead squirrel  
in the road,  
The lilac bushes flowering in  
some yard,  
And the sight of a dog free from  
his chain  
Searching through a neighbor's  
trash can.*

In the aftermath of erotic bliss, there is always some dog going through the garbage can to remind us of the self-absorbed indifference of our fellow creatures.

The absence of razzle-dazzle in these poems is salutary. Can we consider this the by-product of a late manner? The late manner of some modern poets (such as Boris Pasternak and Eugenio Montale) moves toward direct statement, as though they no longer felt the need to demonstrate their poetic bona fides with metaphorical inventiveness. Simic has never left off summoning images, but now they seem to pass before his insomniac eyes without having to feed a larger point. Poems may start in the middle of a monologue ("And then there is our Main Street/That looks like/An abandoned movie set/Whose director/Ran out of money and ideas") or end abruptly, like one about a goldfish tossed in a rain puddle, in a throwaway line: "Yeah, poor fish."

In his essays, many of which first appeared in these pages, we hear another voice, that of the cosmopolitan intellectual, university professor, and *raisonneur*. The range is impressive, covering visual art, blues, jazz, food, politics, cities, and all types of literature. Very occasionally, a negative judgment will appear, but for the most part these are appreciations. Especially strong are his sympathetic biographical essays on certain writers who led tragic lives or took extreme aesthetic positions, such as Marina Tsvetaeva, E.M. Cioran, and Witold Gombrowicz, all of whom went further into lonely eccentricity than he was inclined to go.

If he is intrigued by Gombrowicz's provocative defense of immaturity, he finally comes down on the side of the more equable Czesław Miłosz. His characterization of the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai ("how levelheaded he stayed to the very end, balancing his philosophical gloom against a lust for life") could apply to Simic himself. Quoting Brendan Gill's "the first rule of life is to have a good time," he displays his own knack for enjoyment by writing with zest about eating sausages and chili, listening to jazz, and walking through a big city's streets. Wondering whether we can even have modern literature without a city, he rhapsodizes: "If New York is not already heaven, then I don't know what is." He can take

a pass on Nature. "I could never free myself from the thought that Nature is that which is slowly killing me." Meanwhile, he lives half the year in New Hampshire: "With five months of snow and foul weather, one has the choice of dying of boredom, watching television, or becoming a writer."

Some of Simic's most powerful, expressive prose can be found in three essays that deal with the breakup of Yugoslavia. His opposition to any utopian project, including nationalism, which would place a collective interest above the safety of the individual, is unremitting. As Slobodan Milošević was taking power in Serbia, Simic warned early on that he was "bad news," and for his pains was denounced by Serbian nationalists as a traitor. His answer: "The lyric poet is almost by definition a traitor to his own people." As he saw it, "sooner or later our tribe always comes



The remains of a poster of Slobodan Milošević on a wall in Belgrade, September 2001

to ask us to agree to murder," which is one good reason he has resisted tribal identification with a passion: "I have more in common with some Patagonian or Chinese lover of Ellington or Emily Dickinson than I have with many of my own people." Leery of all generalizations, he insists again and again that "only the individual is real." As the civil war heated up, he found that his appeals to forgiveness and reasonableness were met with total incomprehension and finally hatred. Simic, living in America, became the target of rumors:

My favorite one was that the CIA had paid me huge amounts of money to write poems against Serbia, so that I now live a life of leisure in a mansion in New Hampshire attended by numerous black servants.

If he is still able to extract wry humor from the situation, elsewhere he rises to a furious eloquence. There is no longer any hint of mystery or the "unsayable" in these political essays; he knows exactly what he wants to say:

All that became obvious to me watching the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, the way opportunists of every stripe over there instantly fell behind some vile nationalist program. Yugoslav identity was enthusiastically canceled overnight by local nationalists and Western democracies in tandem. Religion and ethnicity were to be the main qualifications for citizenship, and that was just dandy. Those who still

persisted in thinking of themselves as Yugoslavs were now regarded as chumps and hopeless utopians, not even interesting enough to be pitied.

In the West many jumped at the opportunity to join in the fun and become ethnic experts. We read countless articles about the rational, democratic, and civilized Croats and Slovenes, the secular Moslems, who, thank God, are not like their fanatic brethren elsewhere, and the primitive, barbaric, and Byzantine Serbs and Montenegrins....

Anyone who, like me, regularly reads the press of the warring sides in former Yugoslavia has a very different view. The supreme folly of every nationalism is that it believes itself unique, while in truth it's nothing more than a bad xerox copy of every other nationalism. Unknown to them, their self-delusions and paranoias are identical. The

chief characteristic of a true nationalist is that special kind of blindness. In both Serbia and Croatia, and even in Slovenia, intellectuals are ready to parrot the foulest neofascist imbecilities, believing that they're uttering the loftiest homegrown sentiments. Hypocrites who have never uttered a word of regret for the evil committed by their side shed copious tears for real and imaginary injustices done to their people over the centuries. What is aston-

ishing to me is how many in the West find that practice of selective morality and machismo attractive.

With finely controlled sarcasm, Simic demonstrates the advantages of an émigré's double vision. It enables him to see how his uncle Boris "had a quality of mind that I have often found in Serbian men. He could be intellectually brilliant one moment and unbelievably stupid the next." If Simic is finally harder on the Serbs, despite acknowledging that there were war criminals in every faction, he explains: "Nonetheless, it is with the murderers in one's own family that one has the moral obligation to deal first."

Simic has summarized his experience-derived, harshly un-American-sounding outlook as follows: "Innocents suffer and justice is rare is the story of history in a nutshell." Knowing that, he continues to seek to find

a larger setting for one's personal experience. Without some sort of common belief, theology, mythology—or what have you—how is one supposed to figure out what it all means? The only option remaining, or so it seems, is for each one of us to start from scratch and construct our own cosmology as we lie in bed at night.

At age seventy-seven he is still starting from scratch, and writing in bed, his favorite writing spot, alone with the moth, there being, as he sees it, no other option. □



# Two Cheers for the Middle Ages!

Eric Christiansen

## The Middle Ages

by Johannes Fried,  
translated from the German  
by Peter Lewis.  
Belknap Press/Harvard University  
Press, 580 pp., \$35.00

## 1381:

### The Year of the Peasants' Revolt

by Juliet Barker.  
Belknap Press/Harvard University  
Press, 506 pp., \$29.95

## Dark Mirror:

### The Medieval Origins of Anti-Jewish Iconography

by Sara Lipton.  
Metropolitan, 390 pp., \$37.00

Prejudice against the medieval runs deep. It is an adjective applied to atrocity, as in Secretary of State John Kerry's recent comment on the men who murdered 126 people at a school in Peshawar and served "a dark and almost medieval vision." It is also applied to all severe punishment, out-of-date technology (this "medieval" typewriter), and all illiberal attitudes. For many, the Middle Ages are ineradicably reprehensible, as well as comic: knights immobilized in their armor, fat monks panting after licentious nuns, ladies locked into chastity belts. The standbys of eighteenth-century derision have stood the test of time. Remember those angels dancing on a pinpoint? They still dance for those who believe that the medieval schools were engaged in a wasted intellectual effort.

Unfair! the medievalists have shouted, from the days when Edward Gibbon cried "Gone Away!" and set the enlightened hounds on the scent of decay and moldy monks that in his nostrils accompanied the fall of the Roman Empire. Unfair because it has been found again and again that our skills, laws, liberties, nations, and languages are the result of hard work in the millennium reputed dark, unlit by reason, and recessive from the sunshine of the classical civilizations, when perfectly formed philosophers sat debating in public colonnades, monk-free.

Our gratitude to that Greco-Roman civilization is seldom stinted, but those who came afterward have left castles, cathedrals, Italian and Flemish and Byzantine art, printing, plainsong, and parliaments, not to mention universities. Yet the black propaganda of Voltaire, Hume, Kant, and Mark Twain remains suspended in the air like soot in the old factory towns, while intellectuals crowd over the birth of "modernity" like fancied fighting cocks. They will not enjoy the fattest of these books, a translation of Johannes Fried's *The Middle Ages*, which has gone through three editions in the last six years and reads like a counterblast to the hot air of the liberal-humanist interpreters of European history.

They should begin at the end, with the epilogue entitled "The Dark Middle Ages?" where Fried shows his cards and rehearses the errors of the Enlightenment view of the period, as well as those of Romantic medievalism, with unsparing acuity. Then comes the eulogy, when he applies to the Middle Ages the terms



A country household in winter representing the month of February in the duke of Berry's Book of Hours, by the Limbourg brothers, circa 1412–1416

of approval that modern periods are awarded by their fans. Western medieval people are commended by Fried for dynamism, for know-how in all fields of technology and art, for hungry intellectual curiosity, for capitalism, globalism, education, and all-around *Vorsprung durch Technik*. It was, he writes, the medieval pioneers who strangled the serpents of blind faith, ignorance, and unexamined hypotheses in the cradle.

Readers responsive to this rhetoric will be intrigued if not swayed by the way Fried deploys it. Even those who doubt that hot air is the best way of defeating hot air will be impressed by the main body of the work, which covers a thousand years of mostly Western and Central European history with magnificent confidence. He does justice both to the centrifugal fragmentation of the European region into monarchies, cities, republics, heresies, trade and craft associations, vernacular literatures, and to the persistence of unifying and homogenizing forces: the papacy, the Western Empire, the schools, the friars, the civil lawyers, the bankers, the Crusades.

Contrasting elements then coexisted in close proximity and on fairly equal terms, until a tendency to "dehierarchization" began to predominate in many fields during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Popes and emperors still claimed universal authority, but with decreasing success. Marsilius of Padua was arguing that sovereignty lay with bodies of virtuous citizens. Other clerics held that in spiritual matters the whole church in council trumped the authority of its now duplicated heads at Rome and Avignon.

Fried traces this invigorating lack of consensus back to Charlemagne, king

of the Franks and emperor of the West, who died in 814. His learned courtiers instigated a new Age of Reason by copying classical texts, both Christian and pagan, and by disagreeing over points of doctrine. It's not clear why Reason starts there, when Irish, Anglo-Saxon, and Hispanic scholars had been copying classical texts and discussing doctrine long before Charlemagne was born. To be assured without explanation that he invented something called the feudal system will annoy most medievalists and mislead others, even at Frankfurt on the Main. However, the development of rationality is the theme of Fried's book, and it is traced through the application of Aristotle's logic in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century schools to the spread of its influence in ways that make it possible for Fried to postulate a "thought collective" among educated Western Europeans by the end of the period.

Perhaps there was such a collective. In Fried's work its rise and achievement are given a priority that leaves not enough room for contrary cultural developments. One that is noted in his book is the almost universal expectation of the imminent end of all things, of the Last Days and Final Judgment predicted by Jesus and accepted throughout the early church. About every thirty years from the tenth century onward, this fear took possession of various, sometimes large bodies of men and women and inspired them to form mass movements. Collective penance, pentecostal enthusiasm, irregular crusades, unauthorized pilgrimages, messianic mobbing—all these engaged Christians who feared it might soon be too late.

This was a recurrent electrical charge both in politics and in religion, and Fried does it justice although it sits ill with his insistence on the period as an Age of Reason. He seems reluctant to concede that hysteria kept pace and outstripped the achievement of the thought collective. By 1500 art, printing, theater, and song had enriched the West with a vivid backdrop on which the presence of Antichrist, the Last Judgment, the Devil, Hell's Mouth, and torments were made clearer than ever before. Individual consciousness of sin was so intense that the attempted reformation of the church would turn into hell on earth.

Of course, the longing for peace and quiet deserves equal treatment. Limitations on war and restrictions on violence took on new forms in the Middle Ages, and the rejection of gross materialism inspired both the contemplative orders of monks and the barefoot friars who went among secular men and women. This was the time of peacekeeping associations of all kinds, of hermits, and of the benevolent ladies called beguines; of places set apart for refuge and asylum, of hospices and leper houses; of quite long silences, which cannot play much part in the story of dynamism, innovation, and cupiditas that Fried tells.

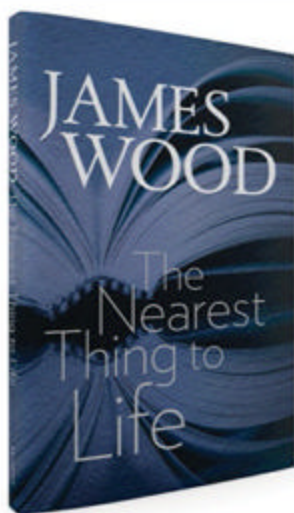
There is never a quiet moment in his Middle Ages, and his vocabulary is alive with fake urgency. Institutions and ideas "burgeon." Churches, societies, and cultures are either "in flux" or "in ferment"; everything is either up-and-coming or out of date. Periods, peoples, and concepts are invested with personalities and powers that enable them to "grapple with logic," "take pains," "yearn for more," "shake to the core," or merely "march," onward and upward unless briefly halted by "antiquated notions," like the emperor Frederick Barbarossa's imperialism. Not for long, while reason, faith, the West, and other abstractions are generously ascribed to one group after another. To carp at the language seems unfair when this is a translation; but the translator, Peter Lewis, is an experienced and trustworthy linguist.

Apart from the language, the critic must feel some chilly drafts through the holes in Fried's splendid historical tapestry. If you want to know about the life and contributions of the Jews in this precocious Age of Reason, you must sing it yourself. He mentions only in passing that Jews were systematically excluded from the urban communities he discusses. While he sees Christianity as a unifying and homogenizing force, he has little to say about the different forms of Christianity developed and practiced in the Byzantine Empire after the East-West schism of the eleventh century.

Nearly a century ago, when the *Cambridge Medieval History* was beginning to appear, the papist provocateur Hilaire Belloc found a fatal flaw in the first volume: it does not mention the Mass once. A flaw, because in this period Mass (Missa) came to mean the act of worship that defined all Christians:



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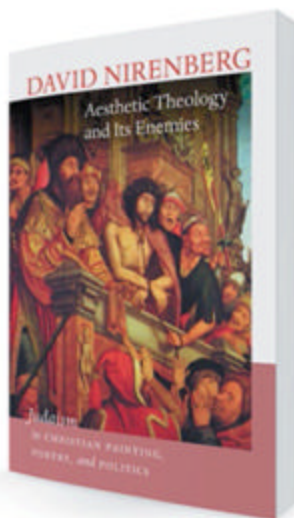


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clergy, laity, the whole population other than pagans, Jews, Muslims, and those heretics who did without priests. To have this rite celebrated all the way from Greenland to the Far East was no slight occurrence in the history of mankind. Hence Belloc's surprise. Fried, who cannot be faulted for his emphasis on the intellectual summits of Christianity, does rather better than the Cambridge medievalists. By my count, he mentions the Mass twice.

While the US secretary of state was holding up the "dark vision" of the Middle Ages for detestation this past December, Alex Salmond, the former leader of the Scottish nationalists, was demanding a new Peasants' Revolt in England, as an insurrection likely to prove beneficial to the Scots. Since a genuine Peasants' Revolt would involve

men, townsmen, minor officials, and even gentry and clergy who considered themselves overtaxed, overgoverned, and misgoverned by profiteering oligarchs unable to defend the coasts against French raiders or lead successful counterattacks into France. The rising was a response to the failure of the upper class, rather than to the class system. Its brief success was owing to the accidental absence of the king's powerful uncles and better military commanders, so that when the insurgents of Kent and Essex reached the outskirts of London they were confronted by a fourteen-year-old boy-king—Richard II—rather than a bristling battalion of men-at-arms.

If New York is London, then Kent is Connecticut: not geographically, but quasi-sociologically. At two open-air

poets this holiday inspired all subsequent English freedom fighters, and tolled the knell of passing feudalism. In fact the rebellion passed much more quickly than the feudalism; villeinage, or ownership of people, had been on the way out before this, but the emancipation was soon canceled while workable serfdom persisted. As the uprising spread, it did so entirely in the name of "King Richard and the True Commons," with sealed parchment to justify and pardon the mayhem.

Barker concludes that the king did in fact sympathize with the rebels; he rescinded his concessions reluctantly and was convinced from then onward that it was the upper rather than the lower classes who were truly dangerous. If so, he was right: earls were to depose him in 1399 and murder him, not churls.



'Harrowing,' in which a boy follows a harrow with a slingshot and stones to scare away birds and keep them from eating the seeds; from the Luttrell Psalter, circa 1325–1335

the decapitation of the archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Treasurer, and many other respectable officials, Salmond clearly has a strong stomach when it comes to confounding his enemies; but there are many who admire the revolt of 1381 as the nearest England ever came to a real live revolution.

Plebeian armies marched or rode to London, confronted the young king, Richard II, and his court, presented their grievances, massacred their enemies, and spread their cause far into the midlands and eastern counties. Burning charters, rent rolls, and law books lit the June skies; abbots and bishops trembled, barons kept out of the way, Flemish immigrants found that the only way to stay alive was to pronounce "bread and cheese" like natives. It was unruly, unkind, and destructive, but in the view of many historians, it was an essentially righteous uprising of the oppressed, who suddenly decided that enough was enough, and that the egalitarianism of the itinerant priest John Ball was good enough for them.

Juliet Barker scored a memorable bull's-eye about ten years ago with her study of the Battle of Agincourt. Now she turns her unsparing eye on the events of 1381 and the general uprising of that summer with the consequent revenge of the authorities over the next two years, and rejects much of the narrative of events outlined above.

A closer look at the chronicles and legal records suggests to Barker that this was not so much a revolt of peasants, that is, of small or middling cultivators tied to manors and their hereditary status of unfreedom. It was instead the revolt of all but the highest classes of landowners, with crafts-

meetings this boy agreed to all that the rebels wanted, including the abolition of hereditary unfreedom (unknown in Kent), the nationalization of the wealth of the church, free trade throughout the kingdom, and pardon for offenses committed meanwhile. While the king's clerks were, on the king's orders, writing out dozens of charters of emancipation and exculpation, to be rushed out to the shires and villages, some of the more Leninesque insurgents were let into the Tower of London and murdered the archbishop and the treasurer, before conducting door-to-door decapitations in the city.

So much is well attested, even if the chroniclers tend to dramatize and vilify the plebeians. Like many modern Englishmen they wanted only to kill the lawyers, the politicians, the foreigners, and certain landlords in the hope of building a fairer society. Unlike modern Englishmen, they actually did the killing, but only up to a point.

What stopped them was the astonishing courage of young Richard, who when the mayor of London killed the rebel chief Wat Tyler in a brawl, rode forward and shouted to the rebels, "Go home. I will be your leader"—and they went, either awed by the divinity that doth hedge a king, or unwilling to kill the king who had authorized the small charters of emancipation they had tucked into their hats and purses and belts. As far as they were concerned, the goose had laid the golden egg. For the next two or three weeks, many English subjects enjoyed a holiday from many of the constraints that had held good for centuries.

Their liberation was not a pretty sight, but for later historians, politicians, and

But it seems fanciful to read his mind as it was in 1381, when there is really no evidence either way.

The respect for royalty and sealed parchment shown by bloody-handed butchers of men may seem paradoxical, but Chaucer's England was like that. An armed population was subject to law, the sword, custom, and market forces in often inharmonious collaboration, with violence never absent. Nor was religion; but bishops tended to be civil servants, and Bishop Despenser of Norwich rode armed from head to foot looking for rebel heads to split open. Both barons and senior clergy needed armed retinues to protect them from robbers and from one another; townsmen fought like cats to defend their trades and borough status. Intimidation and thuggery were endemic, but the reach of the king's and other administrative systems and servants was long and intrusive, and the agents of royal, church, and private law made a good living.

Such a situation gave birth to continual unrest and discontent, and Barker sees 1381 as the year in which the usually diffuse strains of public anger came together, started by a new sort of poll tax to pay for a war against France already lost or discontinued. It was a brief opportunity for anyone with a grudge, grievance, or vendetta and living within a hundred miles of London or York to kill, despoil, humiliate, and rob their enemies in the king's name. The suppression of the revolt from July 1381 to July 1383 was a chance for some of the victims and the offended authorities to kill, despoil, humiliate, and rob in turn, or pardon those who could pay. There were to be no more attempts to levy a poll tax until the time of Charles II, but there was no reform of justice, no abolition of trade restrictions and



charges, and politics were handed back to the king and his barons.

Barker's book is a thorough and workmanlike study, a world away from Fried's comprehensive coverage of the whole medieval continent in flux, but offering a close look at what things were actually like in part of one island off the shore of that continent in one year, insofar as the documents will let her. And where was Chaucer, while his England was in turmoil, and "Jack Straw and his mob" were murdering the Flemish weavers? History does not relate. As his patron was John of Gaunt, the most hated man in England for the time being, my guess would be "under the bloody bed," as the Irish say.

One class of persons who could not participate in the uprising of oppressed groups in 1381 was Jews. Their communities had been expelled nearly a hundred years earlier—in 1290—by King Edward I, and individuals were only allowed back under special license. Two hundred years of the Judaic presence were simply obliterated. However, anti-Semitic iconography continued to be produced in England: pictures of men in funny hats with large hooked noses and straggling and pointed beards, or women in gaudy green raiment with rings in their ears. The houses of Jews portrayed in these images were thought to hold heaps of gold, broken and defiled crucifixes, idols, cats, and the bodies of Christian children who had met the fate of those still-popular young saints William of Norwich, Little Hugh of Lincoln, and Adam of Bristol; for Merry England had been the nursery of the Blood Libel, according to which Jews sacrificed Christian babes.

If that was how English gentiles might have imagined Jews, Sara Lipton explains, they would have been disappointed in every way. In *Dark Mirror*, her meticulous survey of medieval depictions of Jews from many cities and countries across Europe, she finds that where hostile or derisive they were based not on the actual Jewish appearance (which was usually the same as that of the Christians among whom they lived) but on the effort by artists and sculptors to symbolize the moral blindness and materialism of all who failed to recognize the divinity of Christ, whether Jews or not.

By way of support of this proposition, she finds no caricature of Jews earlier than the eleventh century, however fiercely they were blamed by some of the church fathers. Christian veneration of Jewish scripture and Jewish prophets and Christ and the apostles meant that the Jews portrayed had to look venerable. So they were given hats like mitres, long beards, and scrolls; and Lipton deduces the conical brimmed headgear assigned to less venerable Jews after around 1000 to derive from those quasi mitres. Yet the hats shown in early manuscripts look more like those of Mexican peons than those of such noble Hebrews as Melchisadek the priest-king. To identify Jews by their hats seems a weak link; which is not to say that such a link may not have existed, but that the illustrations in Lipton's book don't support it. Besides, if a modern unbeliever were to be denoted by his hat, why would that hat be reminiscent of those worn by ancient witnesses to the truth and foretellers of Christ? Was that irony?

After that, it was a short step to depicting the tormentors of Jesus as hideous grimacing figures, hatted or bareheaded; and so "in giving visual form to loveless looking, medieval Christendom learned to look with hate" on their Jewish friends, neighbors, and creditors. This is not when the hatred began: the laws of the seventh-century Visigothic kings of Spain and the tracts of Agobard against the Jews of Lyons in the ninth century are full of it, as Lipton concedes; but the increasing emphasis on Christ's bodily suffering and the need to avenge it on unbelievers of all sorts made the Jewish presence seem subversive and offensive, even when tolerated and protected by rulers and churchmen.

Although Old Testament Jews continued to be shown in stone and glass as holy and handsome, the conventions of book illustration and wall painting tended to include jabbering, gesticulating, and jeering Jewish onlookers as in the Quentin Matsys *Ecce Homo* now in Madrid or the nasty hags at the Circumcision in a French manuscript of circa 1400. Such distorted images, we are assured, were not intended to rouse hatred of living Jews or wound their feelings, like the cartoons of the twentieth-century Nazi press. The increasing segregation of Jews in the West after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which insisted that they wear distinctive badges, was not the result of visual demonization; the visual demonization was not confined to pictures of Jews, but resulted from a theological drive to increase the devotion of the laity to the Life of Christ. If so, we learn yet again that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. If not, the argument of the book is still worth reading, as art history.

The intentions of the artists are still a problem. When Charles Dickens's illustrator George Cruikshank engraved *Fagin in the Condemned Cell* for *Oliver Twist*, he showed an unmistakably vile old Jew afraid to meet his merited fate on the gallows. Dickens made him unable to pray or show remorse even in that state. Yet neither author nor artist intended to attack or insult Jews. Their aim was to deprecate crime, child abuse, and cruelty, but they could not resist making their second-order villain Jewish, a caricature of the known fence Ikey Solomon.

Fagin is also endowed with charm, hospitable manners, and concern for his young disciples. We think we know him; we don't hate him nearly as much as his creator did. Nevertheless, he became a type by which all Jews were measured, and found wanting by racial purists. There is no reason to suppose that Dickens and Cruikshank were any less pure in their intentions than were the twelfth- and thirteenth-century scribes; and yet it would be a naive apologist who explained the Hebraic Fagin as merely a moral fiction, unconnected with London Low Life of the 1830s.

The "advance praise" for *Dark Mirror* on the back of the jacket announces that it is "a spectacular achievement." One statement begins with the adverbs "Compellingly, thoughtfully." I wouldn't go quite that far but the publisher has done Sara Lipton proud, with full references, frequent text illustrations, and fourteen color plates, at a competitive thirty-seven dollars. □



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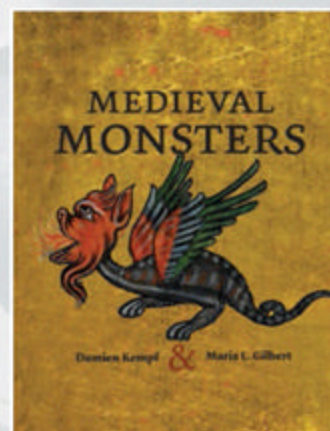
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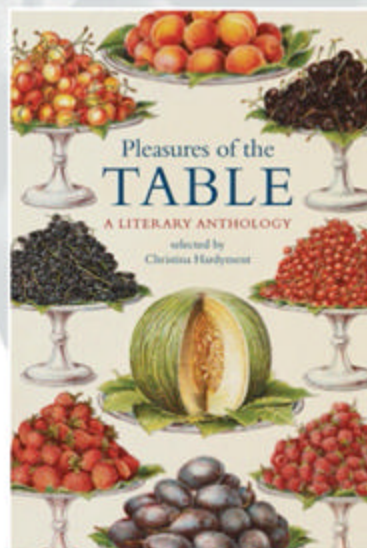
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# The Anatomy of Hell

Richard J. Evans

In the popular imagination, the Nazi concentration camp now features mainly as a place where Jews were taken to be gassed. In a recent German opinion poll, most respondents associated the camps with the persecution and murder of Jews; under 10 percent mentioned other categories of camp prisoners, such as Communists, criminals, or homosexuals. The power of the “Holocaust” as a concept has all but obliterated other aspects of the crimes of the Nazis and the sufferings of their victims and driven the history of the camps from cultural memory. No crime in human history outdoes the genocidal extermination of six million European Jews on the orders of the leader of Germany’s self-styled “Third Reich.” Yet the majority of the Jewish victims of Nazi mass murder were not killed in the camps; they were shot, starved to death, or left to die of diseases that could easily have been prevented or treated but were not. The concentration camp was in no way synonymous with the Holocaust.

While facilities such as Treblinka or Auschwitz-Birkenau, constructed for no other purpose than mass murder, were first established during World War II, the history of the concentration camp, as Nikolaus Wachsmann reminds us in his impressive and authoritative new study, begins much earlier. The idea of concentrating a state’s enemies in a camp went back at least to the end of the nineteenth century, following the invention of barbed wire and the machine gun, in the Boer War and the Spanish-American War, and found expression in the Soviet system of labor camps and other products of twentieth-century dictatorships. But these camps neither formed the template for the Nazi concentration camps nor resembled them in all respects, even if they were similar in some. Ninety percent of inmates survived the Soviet Gulag, for example, while in the wartime camps of the SS, even for prisoners who were registered as inmates and not killed immediately on arrival, the survival rate was less than half. Of some 2.3 million men, women, and children who were put into Nazi concentration camps between 1933 and 1945, more than 1.7 million lost their lives, almost a million of them Jews killed in Auschwitz.

Wachsmann’s gripping, humane, and beautifully written narrative begins with the establishment of the first of the Nazi camps, at a disused munitions factory outside the town of Dachau, near Munich. During the first half of 1933, as Hitler gathered the reins of power to himself, makeshift camps were improvised all over Germany to incarcerate Communists and Social Democrats, the main political groups who resisted the Nazis’ violent seizure of power. Only gradually were these closed down, with the release of the prisoners, many of whom had been

badly beaten and tortured (even the official estimate reckoned that over six hundred were murdered by the Nazis), on promise of refraining from political engagement. By 1934, as Wachsmann showed in his previous book, *Hitler’s Prisons* (2004), the function of political repression had been taken over by the police, the courts, and the regular state prisons and penitentiaries.

The remaining concentration camps, which held fewer than four thousand inmates by 1935, then became the dumping grounds for “asocials,” alcoholics, vagrants, and social deviants. By 1939 there were six such camps, at Ravensbrück, Sachsenhausen, Dachau, Flossenbürg, and Buchenwald in the “old Reich” and Mauthausen in the annexed territory of Austria. During the war, however, as the German economy experienced a rapidly growing labor shortage, with millions of men at the front and millions of women staying at home in obedience to the Nazi image of women as mothers and homemakers, supported by generous subsidies to enable them to do so, the camps were transformed into centers of forced labor, buttressed by the industrial subcamps that spread like a cancer through the body of the German Reich.



Ravensbrück guards Dorothea Binz, Margarete Mewes, Grete Bösel, Vera Salvequart (‘Dr. Vera,’ in the row behind, who worked as a ‘nurse’), and Eugenia von Skene on trial at the War Crimes Court in Hamburg, circa December 1946

John da Cunha/National Archives

the German population as a whole in 1933. Despite the small numbers, on the other hand, Jews were clearly overrepresented in the camps from the very beginning.

Most of the Jews imprisoned in the camps, as Wünschmann shows, were middle-aged businessmen and professionals. They were there for a wide variety of reasons. Initially, in 1933–1934, most of them were left-wing activists, politicians and political journalists, or businessmen denounced by rivals and competitors for supposedly corrupt or criminal practices. Later on, after the Nuremberg Race Laws were passed in 1935, they were joined by

The conditions under which the workers were held were so murderous that for many of them the Nazis coined the term “extermination through labor,” while Auschwitz in particular acquired the unique dual function of providing a labor force and exterminating almost a million Jews brought from other parts of Europe. By the end of the war there were more than 700,000 forced laborers held in this vast network of camps and subcamps in rapidly deteriorating conditions; half of them did not survive the war.

How many of the prisoners were actually Jewish? For most of the period of the camps’ existence, up to the final phase of the war, Wachsmann reckons that Jews made up no more than 10 percent of the inmate population. Kim Wünschmann, in her excellent monograph on the subject, completed as part of a large-scale research project under Wachsmann’s overall direction, reckons that of the 150,000 to 200,000 Germans incarcerated in the camps in 1933, during the Nazi seizure of power, around 5,000 to 10,000 were Jewish, or 5 percent of the camp population up to the middle of 1938. These low figures should not surprise us. Jews, as defined by their religion, made up less than one percent of

men arrested for consorting with non-Jewish women. Some Jews had been imprisoned for homosexuality and taken to the camps on release from prison. Then, as the camps’ function changed in the mid-1930s to house the “asocial,” the regime’s relentless assault on the Jews’ economic position and its continued drive to force Jews out of business and professional life brought a growing number of them into the camps for being “work-shy” or engaging in desperate acts of petty crime in order to stay alive.

Following the Nazi *Anschluss* of Austria in March 1938, there were mass arrests of Jews, above all in Vienna, along with known opponents of the Nazis and supporters of Austrian independence. Most of these people were sent to Dachau, where 2,000 of the 3,500 Austrians who arrived in the camp were classified as Jewish. Shortly afterward, in June 1938, a special “Reich Work-Shy Action,” in which vagrants, deviants, and petty criminals were rounded up on Himmler’s orders across the newly enlarged German Reich and sent to the camps, brought thousands more Jews into the camps. Thirteen percent of the 6,224 men taken to Sachsenhausen in the course of this action, 19 percent of those taken to Dachau, and no fewer than 53 percent of those put in Buchenwald were Jews: altogether 2,259 Jews were added to the overall camp population in June 1938.

Then in November 1938 Hitler ordered the arrest of 30,000 Jewish men in the course of the nationwide pogrom sarcastically dubbed by Berliners the *Reichskristallnacht*, or “Reich Night of Glass Shards,” from the splinters that lay on the streets of Germany’s towns and cities after the Nazis shattered the windows of 7,500 Jewish shops on November 9–10, as well as burning down over one thousand synagogues across the land. This was the first occasion in which an order had gone out to arrest Jews solely because they were Jews. One prisoner already in Buchenwald noted that the inmates were in a state of bewilderment as

Jews were brought in. Jews, Jews, Jews, by the dozen, by the car-

## BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS REVIEW

**KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps**  
by Nikolaus Wachsmann.  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
865 pp., \$40.00

**Before Auschwitz: Jewish Prisoners in the Prewar Concentration Camps**  
by Kim Wünschmann.  
Harvard University Press,  
367 pp., \$45.00

**Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler’s Concentration Camp for Women**  
by Sarah Helm.  
Nan A. Talese/Doubleday,  
743 pp., \$37.50

**Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942–1944**

by Elissa Mailänder,  
translated from the German  
by Patricia Szobar.  
Michigan State University Press,  
405 pp., \$49.95

**The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath**

by Dan Stone.  
Yale University Press,  
277 pp., \$32.50

**Forgotten Trials of the Holocaust**  
by Michael J. Bazyler  
and Frank M. Tuerkheimer.  
NYU Press, 374 pp., \$45.00



load, by the hundred and by the thousand. In all stages of life—wounded, sick, crippled, with broken limbs, missing eyes, fractured skulls, half dead, and dead.

As this report indicated, the new inmates were subjected to extraordinary degrees of violence and brutality by the SS. The camps were not prepared for their arrival, and even without repeated beatings and torture the conditions under which they were held were dire.

Most of the Jews arrested in 1938 were released before the war, a good number after bribing the camp authorities or selling their properties and businesses to local authorities at knock-down prices. Those arrested in November were the first to be set free, but their heads were shaved immediately before their release so that they would be stigmatized in public as former inmates. The intention of the regime was that they should emigrate, and many had to sign official exit documents to do so before gaining their freedom. By the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, half the Jewish population of Germany had gone, leaving mostly the elderly behind. The Jewish population of the camps subsided once again to not much more than its pre-1938 level. On the eve of the war the total number of Jews in the SS concentration camps amounted to about 1,500 out of 21,400.

Most of the Jews who were imprisoned in Nazi camps before the outbreak of war thus survived. But even if, at least up to the November action, they were brought in for reasons other than the fact that they were Jewish, these were often pretexts, and once they had been admitted to the camps they were invariably singled out for especially violent and brutal treatment. The first four inmates of Dachau to be murdered were all claimed by the Nazis to be Communists, but they were also, not coincidentally, Jews; from every truckload of new prisoners in 1933 the SS selected Jews for beating and torture, and in other camps they were treated with a special, sadistic savagery. From the late 1930s onward, Jewish inmates were made to wear a special badge singling them out as Jewish, in addition to or instead of the colored triangles identifying them as political, criminal, or “asocial.” This made their persecution even easier than before.

Then from 1941 onward, as the Nazis’ program of mass extermination of Jews began to unfold, Jewish inmates were removed and taken to extermination centers, where they were killed along with Jews brought from every part of Europe over which the Nazis had control. By the time the war ended, the Nazi need for workers who could contribute to the war economy was bringing increasing numbers of Jews into the camp system rather than the gas chambers—overwhelmingly, adult men rather than women, the old, or the very young, whom the SS did not consider capable of work. Even at this stage, however, Wachsmann estimates that only a third of the camp population consisted of Jews.

Most of the camps were for men, but in the late 1930s a new camp was opened for women, at Ravensbrück, just over fifty miles north of Berlin. In her substantial new book, Sarah Helm, a journalist, recounts the history of the

camp from start to finish, along with the many stories of its inmates. Although this is not an academic work, it is based on thorough and wide-ranging research in archives in twelve countries, on a comprehensive knowledge of the existing literature, and on interviews with survivors. It makes for absorbing and often horrifying, moving, and sometimes, when acts of resistance are described, inspirational reading. Like Wachsmann, Helm rejects the common view that the inmates all passively accepted their fate.

Ravensbrück was opened in May 1939 to house around one thousand women prisoners transferred from other facilities, principally an earlier camp for women prisoners at Lichtenburg. It held female Communists and other opponents of the Nazis, as well as prostitutes, “race defilers,” “asocials,” petty criminals, and Gypsies. On average, about 10 percent of the camp’s prisoners were Jewish. After the war began, the number of inmates climbed steadily, reaching more than seven thousand by 1941 as new arrivals from Poland and then other conquered countries were brought in. By the end of the war, with the expansion of war production and the opening of sub-camps, the total reached some 45,000. There was also a smaller subcamp for male prisoners.

Initially, conditions at Ravensbrück were better than at the men’s camps in general, with work in areas like sewing and, later, war components production, rather than heavy labor, and better hygiene and generally less harsh conditions. As elsewhere, however, the situation began to deteriorate during the war. Evacuations, including the release of around 7,500 prisoners negotiated by the Swedish diplomat Count Folke Bernadotte, meant that there were only some three thousand sick and emaciated women left in the camp when the Red Army arrived at the very end of April 1945. The pitiable state of the inmates, whose shaven heads and emaciated figures had robbed them, as Helm notes, of all traces of femininity, did not prevent the soldiers from raping a large number of them.

Over the entire period of the camp’s existence, Ravensbrück held some 130,000 women, of whom it is thought that at least 30,000 died or were deliberately murdered. The women came from many different countries. They included 40,000 Poles, 18,000 Russians, 8,000 French, 1,000 Dutch, and much smaller numbers from many other nationalities. Some inmates were selected for medical experimentation: their bones were smashed or their calves cut open and injected with gangrenous material, gas bacteria, or staphylococci before being injected with sulphonamides, a precursor of antibiotics, to see if the treatment worked. Toward the end of the war, Rudolf Höss, the former commandant of Auschwitz, arrived with a crew from his old camp to set up a mobile gas chamber, in which an unknown number of inmates were put to death.

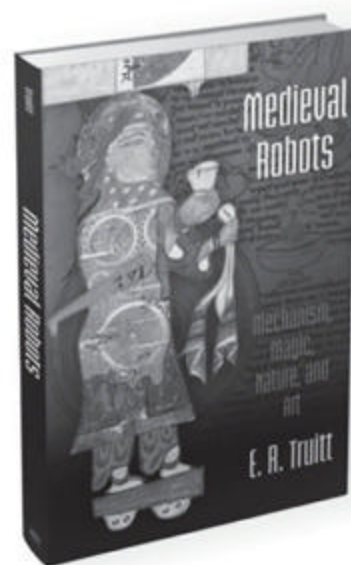
Helm does not confine herself to discussing the terrible experiences of the prisoners, but also has interesting things to say about the guards and camp officials. Many, she notes, were young and inexperienced and not particularly pleased to have been drafted there by the Nazi women’s organizations to which they belonged. Later, during the

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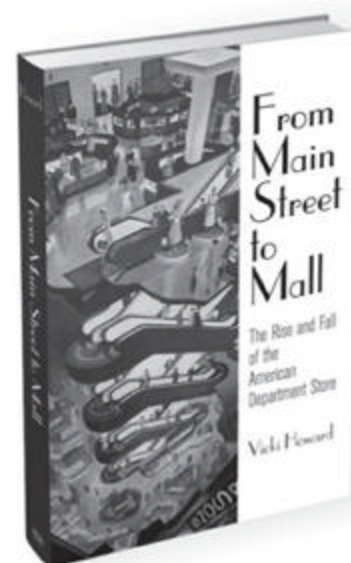
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war, the businesses that took prisoners as forced laborers had to supply their own guards, who quickly became a byword for corruption, sexual license, and brutality.

In her carefully researched monograph on Majdanek in the second half of the war, Elissa Mailänder puts the behavior and motivation of twenty-eight female guards under close scrutiny. She uses memoirs, filmed interviews, and postwar trial and other records to show how the experience of almost unlimited power over the inmates brought them to identify closely with the regime, whose propaganda and pressure to deliver “results” strengthened the women’s allegiance to Nazi ideology.

The coercive hierarchy of the camp also brought the guards within a short time to begin maltreating the prisoners on their own initiative. Most of the women were from a lower-middle-class background; many of them were nurses. Using comparative material from Ravensbrück, Mailänder argues that refined cruelty, often seen as feminine in the popular imagination, gave some of the most sadistic guards an aura of glamour, while crude and brutal violence, seen as masculine, caused inmates to regard those who inflicted it as ugly and unattractive. “In both Ravensbrück and Majdanek,” she concludes, “female violence was regarded as something exceptional.” In postwar trials, such as that of Irma Grese, “the Beautiful Beast,” violent female guards were seen as denatured, unfeminine, and unnatural beings, objects of peculiar and often prurient fascination for the international press. However, the distinction between cruelty and violence is not always easy to draw, and overall, Mailänder’s thesis is less than entirely convincing.

The horrors of the camps shocked international opinion when they were uncovered to their full extent as the Allied forces entered them at the end of the war. As the prolific Holocaust historian Dan Stone shows in his new book, *The Liberation of the Camps*, Red Army soldiers were appalled at the discovery of the emaciated, lice-ridden bodies of the survivors and the piles of corpses that littered the grounds of the camps. Their outrage fueled the savagery of their treatment of the German population they encountered and was subsequently used to justify the orgy of rape and murder in which they indulged. In the West, the most that Allied troops did was to force German civilians to visit the camps and see the results of Nazism for themselves, and in some cases force them to bury the dead and assist with clean-up operations.

As Stone notes in his engrossing and illuminating book—the first full and comparative study of the subject—the fact that the extermination camps were located in the East for a long time skewed public perceptions in the West. When the Soviets liberated the major death camps, they found relatively few inmates left, either because they were dead or because they had already been evacuated by the Nazis. Thus the great majority of survivors were in camps liberated by the Western Allies, and it was their stories that created the image by which the camps were long after known. The Soviet regime did not encourage its troops to talk openly about what they found, and it presented Nazi

atrocities as crimes against the citizens of Eastern Europe, not specifically against Jews. In the immediate postwar years the extermination camps and the genocide against the Jews were generally pushed to the margin of public consciousness.

Stone usefully points out that liberation was not always a matter of Allied troops arriving at camp gates to be greeted by cheering inmates; there were many more prosaic encounters, particularly away from the main centers, when prisoners simply walked away, while in some places German prisoners were rearrested by suspicious Allied soldiers on their arrival. Liberation was also a gradual process, as survivors readjusted to normal life, were transferred to displaced persons camps, or decided what to do with the



Heinrich Himmler with a political prisoner in the Dachau workshops during an official inspection of this ‘model’ camp, May 8, 1936

rest of their lives. Many were unable to recover despite the efforts of Allied medical personnel. Others felt guilt and shame at having survived, or began a desperate search for missing relatives who in all likelihood had perished.

Stone’s approach, however, carries with it some problems. The subtitle of his book, *The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, raises the question of the extent to which the camps in general can be subsumed under the “Holocaust” as a concept. He is aware of course of the fact that Jews only formed a minority among the inmates of the camps, but in practice he is constantly conflating the two categories, referring to “Jewish camp inmates” as if these were all there were. Stone tells us that “there was a collapse in the distinction between the murder of the Jews and the function of the concentration camps” because Jews evacuated from camps in the East in “death marches” ended up in the camps in western and central Germany that were liberated by the Allies, but even here there was a majority of non-Jews in the camps, as Wachsmann and Wünschmann both point out.

The genocide of the Jews was directed against a “world-enemy” whom the Nazis attempted to exterminate wherever its members could be located; but their killing was only one part, if a unique one, of a far wider program of mass murder. The official “General Plan for the East,” for example, envisaged the deliberate killing of up to 45 million “Slavs” in Eastern Europe, to clear the way for German settlement.

Stone misrecognizes a crucially important aspect of this landscape of mass murder when he claims that “over the course of the war some 3 million Soviet POWs died in SS captivity.” In fact (as the source he cites for this claim makes quite clear) these unfortunate soldiers were killed not by the SS but by the regular German army, thus frustrating Himmler’s plan to use them as slave labor. It was not just the SS that committed mass murder in the name of the German people during the war, and not just Jews who were killed.

One of the most interesting and original features of Stone’s book is that he deals not only with the experience of the liberators, but also takes in the perspective of the inmates and the camp personnel. Many of the latter, as he notes, were shot by horrified Al-

tion that offenders should be tried in the countries where they had held office under the Nazi regime resulted in a further series of trials in countries formerly occupied by the Germans, including Italy, Norway, and Poland, where over two thousand Germans were extradited and indicted between 1945 and 1949, including the former commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss.

Few of these trials are now widely remembered. *Forgotten Trials of the Holocaust*, by the legal scholars Michael J. Bazyler and Frank M. Tuerkheimer, is thus especially welcome. Some of these trials, of course, have been the subject of scholarly investigation in their own right, but in bringing all the trials together and contrasting the varying styles of their conduct in the different jurisdictions studied the authors have done legal scholars and students a service. The English commitment to due process, for example, contrasts with the indifference of the French judiciary to it in case of Pierre Laval; the American concern for evidence in the *Einsatzgruppen* trial differed markedly from the narrow vision of the German court in the Auschwitz case.

Despite the book’s title, not all the trials it covers involved the mass murder of European Jews. The trial of Laval, prime minister of the collaborationist Vichy regime in France following the German defeat of the French armies in 1940, was about his alleged plot to undermine the French Republic and his treasonable collaboration with the enemy, not about his part in the deportation and murder of French Jews, which was mentioned in the proceedings but was not on the charge sheet. The trial of SS guards and other people in positions of authority at the Dachau concentration camp was about their violation of the laws of war through the maltreatment of non-German civilian and military prisoners. And the trial in Hamburg of thirty-eight camp personnel at Ravensbrück was on similar charges, with the addition of cruel and illegal medical experimentation on inmates.

Bazyler and Tuerkheimer have made a good start, if a rather narrowly legal one, but much remains to be discovered about the vast array of trials that took place after the war. Taken together, these books tell us an enormous amount about the crimes of the Nazis and remind us once more of the moral depths to which they sank. In particular, Wachsmann’s monumental study will surely become the standard one-volume account of the Nazi concentration camps for many years to come.

To subsume all of these crimes under the concept of the “Holocaust” is to narrow our vision unduly and to constrain our ability to pursue similar crimes in the future. As the two lawyers remark: “It is tragic that triggers for prosecutions of genocide and other mass atrocities still exist, that the brutalization of civilian populations and massive theft, rape, and dismemberment of peoples is not just a historical vignette, but part of today’s news. At least, however,” they conclude, ending on a note of cautious optimism, “the ideas of the 1940s have evolved into a system of justice to deal with some of these crimes,” and that is “an improvement over where we were seventy years ago.” □



# Le Jazz Hot

Adam Shatz

## After Django: Making Jazz in Postwar France

by Tom Perchard.  
University of Michigan Press,  
297 pp., \$80.00; \$39.95 (paper)

## Free Jazz/Black Power

by Philippe Carles  
and Jean-Louis Comolli,  
translated from the French  
by Grégory Pierrot.  
University Press of Mississippi,  
256 pp., \$65.00

Jazz is an art that inspires possessive devotion, and nowhere more so than in France. That proud sense of ownership is understandable: Paris opened its arms to jazz when it was a motherless child back home, a music associated with brothels, race mixing, and other vices. The American clarinetist Sidney Bechet was declared a genius when he came to Paris in 1919 with Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra. Darius Milhaud was so fascinated by what he heard in Harlem that he composed music for a ballet rich in jazz rhythms, *La Création du monde*, in 1923. A year later, a black American combat aviator, Eugene Bullard, who had fought with the French at Verdun and earned a Croix de Guerre, opened a club on rue Pigalle, Le Grand Duc, where other black expatriates mingled with French jazz fans. "Harlem in Montmartre" was so full of musicians that, as Bechet recalled, "it seemed like you just *couldn't* get home before ten or eleven in the morning."

Even Miles Davis, who abhorred sentimentality, allowed himself to become nostalgic about his first trip to Paris in 1949. "I loved being in Paris and loved the way I was treated," he wrote in his autobiography. "The band and the music we played sounded better over there. Even the smells were different." Davis met Jean-Paul Sartre and the jazz critic Boris Vian, who also played trumpet, and fell in love with the singer Juliette Gréco. Walking along the Seine with Gréco, he felt as if he were "in some kind of trance.... It was April in Paris. Yeah, and I was in love." In the dream life of black American musicians, Paris has long been the closest thing to heaven: a place where they were recognized as artists; where they wouldn't be beaten up by cops or stripped of their cabaret cards; where they could walk arm and arm with a white woman without attracting hostile stares.

It wasn't always so. From the 1920s until the end of World War II, jazz set off ferocious opposition in France, particularly in extreme right-wing circles where it was vilified as a "black peril." It was only after the Liberation that jazz was fully accepted in France. By then it had acquired an aura of antifascist resistance, an honor it did not entirely merit. The young jazz fans known as *zazous* or *swings* were celebrated for their anti-Nazi sympathies, but neither the music nor the clubs were suppressed during the Occupation, though blacks and Jews were banned, and all the players were white. The owner of the Hot Club, Charles Delaunay, a member of the Resistance, protected the music he presented by passing it off as a uniquely

French jazz, not the "Judeo-Negroid" abomination the Führer reviled. Delaunay's fiction satisfied the German soldiers who frequented his club more than it did French supporters of Vichy, who assailed jazz in the press and assaulted the *zazous* in the streets. That jazz had long been controversial among the French was forgotten after 1945, when the love of jazz was woven into the Gaullist myth of a nation united against fascism.

The ambiguity of France's attraction to Afro-America was surely what James Baldwin had in mind when, in 1960, he suggested that "someone,



Juliette Gréco and Miles Davis at the Salle Pleyel, Paris, 1949

some day, should do a study in depth of the role of the American Negro in the mind and life of Europe, and the extraordinary perils, different from those of America but not less grave, which the American Negro encounters in the Old World." Baldwin's challenge has been taken up in recent years by a group of jazz historians working on France. Tom Perchard's *After Django* is the latest addition to an impressive body of scholarship that includes Ludovic Tournès's magisterial *New Orleans sur Seine* (1999), Jeffrey Jackson's *Making Jazz French* (2003), Matthew Jordan's *Le Jazz* (2010), and Andy Fry's *Paris Blues* (2014).

What these histories have shown is that when the French talked about jazz, they invariably talked about their own reactions: their relationship to modern culture and American power, racial diversity, and, above all, national identity. The disproportionate contribution that African-Americans made to the creation of jazz beguiled the French, but also caused them concern. Could French musicians play jazz with authority? Could the music be "assimilated" and made French (or "universal," a word French critics sometimes used interchangeably) or did its vernacular roots make it irremediably foreign?

As Tom Perchard argues in his illuminating study, the most persuasive case for a distinctively French jazz was made in the mid-1930s by a French Gypsy guitarist, Django Reinhardt, who, with the violinist Stéphane Grappelli, led the Quintette du Hot-club de France. Born in 1910, Reinhardt, who

had lost the use of the third and fourth fingers of his left hand in a fire, was a breathtaking improviser with a flair for improbable but inspired rhythmic shifts, and a harmonic approach that prefigured the chord substitutions of bebop. His lilting, whimsical *jazz manouche*, or gypsy jazz, evoked the world of Parisian working-class bars and cafés where, as a teenager, Reinhardt had played banjo guitar in bal-musette and tango groups. Reinhardt also performed with Coleman Hawkins, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington, and seems never to have fretted over the nationality of his style: jazz was a country

without borders, and he felt entirely at home in it.

Reinhardt's serenity about jazz's origins was not widely shared among critics who felt "culturally and geographically distanced from the music's perceived source," as Perchard puts it. Some of the music's earliest French admirers attempted to bridge this distance by claiming that the word "jazz" derived from *jaser*, to gossip or chatter, and that, as one critic put it, it was "black only by accident." Krikor Kelekian, an Armenian émigré who went by the name Grégor and led a popular Parisian band called "Grégor et ses grégoriens" in the 1920s, insisted that he played a "Latin," rather than American or "*nègre*," style of jazz.

French musicians were so afraid of competition from American musicians that the National Assembly passed a law in 1922 that limited the number of foreign musicians employed in a club to 10 percent of the French musicians. By 1934, there were more black American musicians in Shanghai than in Paris. In the 1930s and 1940s, the face of jazz in Paris dance halls was white, its dominant genre a symphonic swing closer to the popular *chanson* than to the blues, or for that matter to Django's *jazz manouche*, which was "only moderately successful" before the war. This was the music that a young critic named Hugues Panassié pilloried as "straight" or "fake" jazz.

Panassié, who did more to spread the gospel of black American jazz than anyone in France, was a right-wing monarchist who worshiped negritude. Born in 1912, he was the son of an engineer who had made his fortune in Russian

manganese, and grew up in a castle in the south of France. He discovered jazz when he was fourteen years old, while recovering from a bout of polio that left him paralyzed in one of his legs and forced him to use a walking stick. Like most of his countrymen, he first stumbled on jazz through the work of white bandleaders like Paul Whiteman and Jack Hylton. But when he heard Louis Armstrong, he became a fervent partisan of black American jazz, which he called "*le jazz hot*."

In 1932, he created the Hot Club Association with Charles Delaunay, the son of the painters Robert and Sonia. The goal of the Hot Club, which organized concerts and radio programs, and published a magazine, *Le Jazz Hot*, was to "defend the interests of the music and its amateurs." It was a cross between a fan club and a political party, and Panassié was its chief ideologue. He pursued his mission with inexhaustible zeal, notably in the "*conférence-audition*," a lecture illustrated with musical excerpts where, as one witness remembered, "Mr Panassié went into a frenzy of movement, jerking his whole body in time to the records, playing every solo in pantomime."

Panassié's most famous book was his first, *Le Jazz hot*, published in 1934, when he was twenty-two. What defined hot jazz, he argued, was the presence of "Negro swing," the "essential element, the element one does not find in any other music." He attributed to jazz something like magical properties. His belief in the musical superiority of blacks was shaped by his friend Mezz Mezzrow, a Jewish-American clarinetist who passed as a black man, and who introduced Panassié to the pleasures of Harlem nightlife. Whites could learn to play "hot," and even help to "perfect the form," but blacks, he wrote, would always be "more naturally inclined." To Panassié it was no wonder that Django Reinhardt was "one of the rare white musicians comparable to the Negroes": after all, the Gypsy guitarist belonged to "a race which has remained very primitive."

Panassié was a primitivist, but his celebration of the hot style, as Perchard notes, drew upon ideas that were more eccentric than the ephemeral wave of Negrophilia that swept Paris when Josephine Baker did her banana dance at the Revue Nègre in the 1920s. Panassié was an admirer of Charles Maurras, and moved in circles close to Maurras's far-right Catholic movement Action Française. In the 1930s he published a jazz column in an extreme right-wing magazine, *L'Insurgé*. It was a peculiar venue for a jazz enthusiast: most Maurrassians despised jazz as a corrupting force of modern America, a music associated with blacks, Jews, and the "noise of the machine." (Maurras himself was deaf.)

But as Ludovic Tournès points out in *New Orleans sur Seine*, Panassié was one of a number of young Maurrassians in the 1930s who were captivated by the avant-garde, from jazz to Surrealism and Soviet cinema. Panassié saw no contradiction between his love of jazz and his political convictions. On the contrary, he heard echoes in jazz of a "primitive musical conception [that]

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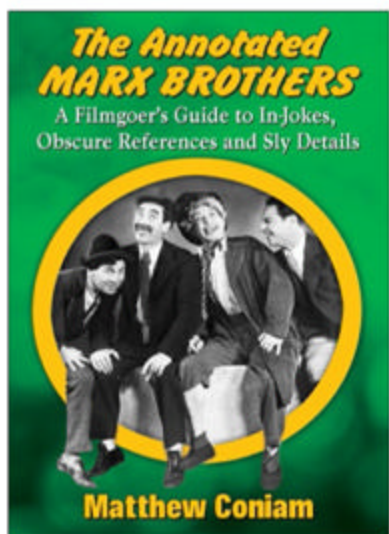
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had arisen many centuries ago among the people of Europe." He believed, or persuaded himself, that jazz embodied the transcendent values threatened by secularism, rationalism, and other republican ills. His faith was reinvigorated on a trip to Harlem in 1939, when he heard the Chick Webb Orchestra at the Savoy Ballroom and experienced what he called "the love of God."

As Perchard notes, Panassié makes for very strange reading today, because his praise of jazz is couched in Maurasian ideas about racial purity and civilizational decline. Yet what is even more striking today is how Panassié turned those ideas on their head: Sidney Bechet and Louis Armstrong were not exactly icons of the French nationalist right. What he could not abide was the possibility that his musical heroes might try (in his words) to "reason and to 'improve' their music." He considered the idea of artistic evolution to be "a great farce": there were only "fertile...and decadent periods." Bebop represented decadence of the worst sort: the corruption of a noble, primitive art by "white" influences. Like the "moldy figs" in the United States who championed the Dixieland revival, he ended up praising white musicians who simulated antiquarian black styles as more authentic representatives of jazz than Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk. Bebop's supporters reminded him of the left-wing Catholic "progressistes" whom the Vatican had condemned in 1947 for their attempt to reconcile Christianity and socialism. For the remainder of his career, Panassié stood at the gates of the jazz church, warding off the incursions of bop, free jazz, and other "traitors to the true black music." In his weekly jazz column for *Combat*, Boris Vian made a sport of mocking Panassié as the "pope" of jazz.

Panassié's opposition to bop provoked a schism with Charles Delaunay, his partner at the Hot Club, shortly after the Liberation. In the war over the future of jazz in France, Panassié, who had retreated to his estate in Montauban and played records for German soldiers, didn't stand a chance against Delaunay, a veteran of the Resistance. The Hot Club split into Panassié's Hot Club de France and Delaunay's Federation of French Hot Clubs. Delaunay allied himself with a former Panassié disciple, the young critic André Hodeir, who took over *Le Jazz Hot*.

In his first book, *Le Jazz, cet inconnu* (1945), published when he was twenty-four, Hodeir echoed Panassié in describing jazz as "the image of the black man: simple, naive, dynamic, sensual, sometimes comic, always brimming with a fervent sensibility that reveals all of a sudden an unsuspected profundity." But Hodeir repudiated both Panassié's racialism and his breathless fandom, and emerged as a sharp

analyst of the harmonic innovations in the music of Parker and Monk. As ardent a modernist as Panassié was a reactionary, Hodeir saw jazz as an exemplary modern music, and sprinkled his cool, erudite essays with allusions to Debussy and Stravinsky, Klee and Husserl. Unlike Panassié, Hodeir was no mere fan, but a composer who had studied at the Conservatoire under Olivier Messiaen, and who dabbled in serialism and *musique concrète*. He was also an accomplished jazz musician, a violinist who performed under the stage name "Claude Laurence" and recorded with Kenny Clarke.

Hodeir understood that if jazz was to be established in France as an art worthy of serious attention, it had to



Django Reinhardt at the Aquarium, New York City, 1946

be rescued from Panassié's amateurism. "What do I care if some self-styled oracle thinks such-and-such a musician is 'terrific' or such-and-such a chorus 'awful'?" he wrote, in an obvious reference to his mentor. "Either I am capable of recognizing these things or I am not. And if I am not, why should I go to swell the ranks of a congregation, persuading myself that the God-given word is right?" Miles Davis praised Hodeir as the "only...critic [in France] who understood what I was doing."

Yet as discerning as Hodeir was, he remained a prisoner of classical assumptions about musical progress. Like Panassié, he preferred black American jazz—the so-called *école noire*—to the cooler, white styles, such as the West Coast jazz of Chet Baker, Gerry Mulligan, and Stan Getz. Yet he worried that the vernacular features of jazz made it less than "universal." And though he admitted, somewhat grudgingly, that "the essence of jazz lies partially in a certain *Negro spirit*," he insisted that blues feeling and improvisation were "inessential." The destiny of jazz was to outgrow its humble roots.

Hodeir's prediction was tinged with melancholy over the decline of the things he loved about black American jazz. Yet he also spotted an opportunity in the "prospect of a form of jazz in which its origins are but a memory." Although he praised Monk as "the first jazzman who has had a feeling for spe-

cifically modern values," he doubted that a musician without conservatory training could realize the "all-encompassing formal concept implicit in his ideas." Only "that foreign species, the composer," could introduce jazz to the "splendors of form" and supply it with a "true balance between freedom and restraint." This was the role Hodeir envisioned for himself. Alas, he was a much better critic than a composer of jazz. His attempt to fuse classical modernism and big band music in what he called "simulated improvisation" was a French cousin of the American "Third Stream" of composers, such as Gunther Schuller and George Russell, and the results were even more ersatz and mannered. Hodeir eventually gave up jazz criticism to write novels for children. His last composition was entitled "Bitter Ending."

William P. Gottlieb/Library of Congress

The French writer who came closest to the spirit of jazz in the 1940s and 1950s was Boris Vian. Vian, who died in 1959 at age thirty-nine, is discussed only in passing in *After Django*, perhaps because he was a bohemian chronicler of the Paris scene rather than a systematic thinker. But his importance can scarcely be overstated, particularly as a liaison between black American musicians and the Left Bank intelligentsia. It was Vian who shepherded Parker and Ellington around Paris, introducing them to everyone from Sartre and Beauvoir to Gaston Gallimard and the editors of *Présence af-*

*ricaine*. He also wrote the liner notes for Miles Davis's only studio session in Paris, when he made the mesmerizing soundtrack for Louis Malle's 1957 noir, *Elevator to the Gallows*.

That film helped set off a trend: Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Melville, and François Truffaut all used jazz to create a mood of urbane sophistication and moral ambiguity. Davis's score was recorded in a single night in a studio lit by three standing lamps. As Malle screened the film, Davis improvised on a set of themes, along with the drummer Kenny Clarke and a trio of superb French musicians: the pianist René Urtreger, the bassist Pierre Michelot, and the tenor saxophonist Barney Wilen. Malle claimed that Davis made up the music on the spot, one of several myths about the session that Perchard elegantly dissects. The crepuscular music on *Elevator to the Gallows* speaks for itself: it is one of Davis's most poetic performances, and a harbinger of the modal jazz he perfected two years later on *Kind of Blue*.

By the mid-1960s, the noir jazz of *Elevator to the Gallows* had given way to a rather different kind of noir, with the birth of free jazz and its deepening association with black militancy. The rebellious jazz of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Albert Ayler seemed to require an analysis that looked beyond music to the transformations inside black America. A younger gen-



eration of French jazz critics attached themselves to various radical styles of will, particularly Marxism and the insurrectionary Third Worldism of Frantz Fanon.

The most influential of these critics, Jean-Louis Comolli, was a Parisian born in Algiers in 1941. A member of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* editorial board, Comolli had fallen under the spell of LeRoi Jones's 1963 study *Blues People*, which described jazz as an expression of black alienation and revolt. In a 1966 essay entitled "Voyage au bout de la new thing," he characterized free jazz as a "music of combat," part of a global struggle against the capitalist West. It made little sense, he argued, to judge free jazz according to European aesthetic criteria of beauty and form, as Hodeir had done, because it was based precisely on "the refusal of our canons, our criteria, the values of our civilization."

After May 1968, Hodeir's *Le Jazz Hot* was taken over by young Marxists, just as the *Cahiers du Cinéma* had been. Well through the 1970s, its pages were filled with exaltations of free jazz as the soundtrack of Black Power, expressed with a passion that had seldom been extended to Algerians or Vietnamese fighting French rule. New Left jazz critics reserved particular scorn for Hugues Panassié, who, as Comolli and Philippe Carles put it in their 1971 manifesto *Free Jazz/Black Power*—just published for the first time in English—"did not really see blacks any differently from colonizers."

Yet the old man's ghost had never been entirely exorcised. Where Panassié distinguished between real and fake jazz, New Left critics drew rigid lines between "revolutionary" and "bourgeois" jazz. Their coverage of LeRoi Jones (who had since renamed himself Amiri Baraka) and of militant jazz musicians like the saxophonist Archie Shepp was no less reverential than Panassié's writing on Armstrong. They also tended to celebrate earthy and raucous styles of free jazz, and to disparage more cerebral ones as inauthentic.

When a group of avant-garde jazz musicians from Chicago settled in France in 1969, Paris soon made its preferences clear. The Art Ensemble of Chicago, whose performances included "sun" percussion, recitations of poetry, and African costumes, were an immediate sensation. "They are black," read the program note for one of their concerts. "When you venture into their cave at the Lucernaire, rue Odessa, you believe that you are at a magical rite. Meditative and serious, four men explore a jungle of Baroque instruments: brass, strings, and all kinds of percussion." (The Art Ensemble's tricksterish humor was mostly lost on their French listeners, who imagined themselves at an updated version of the *Revue Nègre*.)

By contrast, the saxophonist Anthony Braxton, who moved to Paris the same year with the Creative Construction Company, met with a chillier reception because of his interest in Stockhausen and Cage. "We were not acceptable African-Americans," Braxton recalled. "Our music was viewed as cold, intellectual, borrowing from Europe or something."

The new radical criticism sought to liberate jazz, but its unintended effect,

as Hodeir noted, was to ghettoize it, and to deprive it of independent aesthetic value: "Anybody can take an instrument, anyone can attach the title 'Ode to Malcolm' to the sounds that he extracts from his instrument, to the music—good or bad—that he makes." Anybody could, in principle, but white French musicians did so at the risk of engaging in minstrelsy. Not surprisingly, some began to wonder if they had any right to play free jazz. "The trouble is that we're playing a stolen music," the reedman Michel Portal said. "*Le noir* person has something that condenses everything against which he can revolt: the white American and his culture. What is it that we fight against?" Portal never entirely abandoned jazz, but he devoted more of his energy to performing modern classical music, and to devising a synthesis of free improvisation and the Basque music of his childhood.

In their search for an indigenous style or "imaginary folklore," some musicians plunged into radical regionalist movements fighting the French government; others took part in "animation," a kind of collaborative education conducted with poor and disabled children. Even Barney Wilen, one of the most effective French interpreters of the *école noire*, briefly quit playing jazz in favor of "primitive free rock," a music he claimed to have discovered while distributing medicine to Congolese pygmies. As Perchard writes, "the ghost of an old jazz primitivism haunted the mission."

Yet for all their efforts to emancipate themselves from jazz, the music of French free improvisers was not so far removed from the work of their African-American peers as they might have imagined. Musicians like Braxton, Wadada, Leo Smith, and Roscoe Mitchell were building highly personal idioms out of a marriage of jazz and avant-garde classical sources. The "imaginary folklore" of Michel Portal and Barney Wilen found echoes in the work of the trumpeter Don Cherry, who virtually invented "world music" on his travels in North Africa. The music of black American innovators was no less cosmopolitan, or introspective, than the work of their French peers. It was also less self-conscious, perhaps because it was less afflicted by the anxiety of influence.

Most French jazz musicians, of course, have never allowed such anxieties to discourage them from playing jazz. The pianist Martial Solal, who was born to a Jewish family in Algiers in 1927, has produced a particularly rich body of work, and is rightly admired as an improviser of wit and invention, an heir of Art Tatum and Bud Powell. Yet no major innovators have emerged in France since Django Reinhardt, an absence implicitly acknowledged by Perchard's title. And though the audience for jazz in Paris remains strong, its jazz scene can scarcely compete with New York. When Miles Davis left Paris in 1949, Kenny Clarke told him he was "a fool to go back." In New York, Davis succumbed to a heroin addiction it would take him four years to beat, but he never regretted leaving Paris. "I didn't think the music could or would happen for me over there. Plus, the musicians who moved over there seemed to me to lose something, an energy, an edge, that living in the States gave them." □

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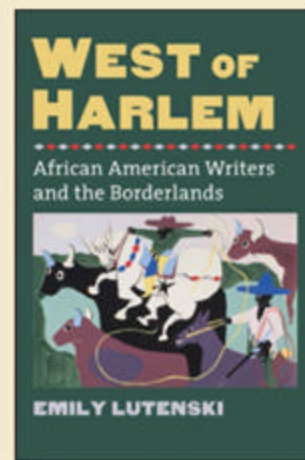
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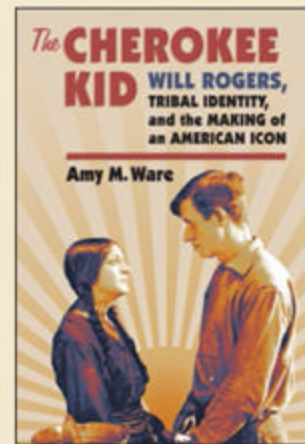
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# Mexicans, Spaniards, Incas, and Their Art

J. H. Elliott

**Imperialism and the Origins of Mexican Culture**  
by Colin M. MacLachlan.  
Harvard University Press,  
340 pp., \$35.00

**Painting in Latin America, 1550–1820**  
edited by Luisa Elena Alcalá  
and Jonathan Brown.  
Yale University Press,  
477 pp., \$75.00

## 1.

On August 10, 1519, five ships, under the command of Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese captain in Spanish service, set out from Seville on an epic voyage that would end on September 6, 1522, when the *Victoria*, with eighteen survivors on board, limped back into Seville, having circumnavigated the globe. Meanwhile a Spanish adventurer, Hernán Cortés, after disembarking in April 1519 on the Mexican coast with a small band of Spaniards, overthrew the “empire” of its Mexica overlord, Montezuma II, with the help of large numbers of indigenous allies, and laid the foundations of Spain’s “empire of the Indies” in the vast area of conquered territory that he christened “New Spain.” That brief span of three years between 1519 and 1522 marks the emergence of two dominant themes in the history of the succeeding centuries—globalization and territorial-based European imperialism. Between them they have transformed the world.

Colin MacLachlan, a professor of history at Tulane University whose previous publications include *Spain’s Empire in the New World\** and a co-authored work, *The Forging of the Cosmic Race*, tells us in an autobiographical prologue to his new book, *Imperialism and the Origins of Mexican Culture*, how his experiences as a child of empire, specifically of the British and American empires, awakened his interest in imperial themes. He also tells us how he was struck, in what sounds like a Gibbonian moment, by the fate of “a once magnificent empire of the New World,” while living and studying “atop the ruins of Tenochtitlan, destroyed and rebuilt as Mexico City by Hernán Cortés.” He displays a truly Gibbonian ambition in seeking to relate the histories of Mesoamerican civilizations, Roman and medieval Iberia, and the Moorish-Christian encounter to the post-conquest creation of “mestizo Mexico.” The dedication of his book to his “mestizo son” suggests a degree of personal involvement in a theme of universal significance.

We live today in a mestizo world. Sebastián de Covarrubias defined *mestizo* in his Spanish dictionary of 1611 as “what is engendered from [the mixing of] different species of animals,” and derives it from *miscere*, to mix. There seems to be no adequate English equiv-



Anonymous Cuzco artist: Virgin of Cocharcas, circa 1730–1750

alent of *mestizaje*. The *Oxford Spanish Dictionary* uses the questionable definition “people of mixed race.” “Miscegenation” has too many pejorative connotations, and such words as “hybridity” and “hybridization,” although neutral, have not caught on as terms applicable to human relationships.

In discussing these terminological questions Colin MacLachlan writes:

Although the racial definition of a Mestizo is a person born to Indian and European parents, a better definition of a Mestizo is a person who functions within a modified culture drawn from both the indigenous and European historical-cultural experience: in short, those who embrace cultural *mestizaje* and organize their personal life and behavior accordingly.

Under this wide definition, almost everyone in central Mexico very soon becomes a mestizo, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, thanks to the rapid modification of Mesoamerican culture under the impact of the Spanish conquest. The category “mestizo” would therefore apply to the indigenous population that, more than a hundred years later, still made up almost three

quarters of the total population of New Spain, in spite of the catastrophic ravages wrought by epidemics since the arrival of the Spaniards.

MacLachlan’s definition, however, appears to accord with the official description by the Mexican government between 1917 and 2004 of Mexico as a “mestizo nation.” In 2004, as MacLachlan tells us in one of his numerous and often lengthy endnotes, the president officially declared the mestizo Mexican nation to be “based also on indigenous roots.” “Ironically,” comments MacLachlan, “that is the definition of a Mestizo culture,” and he goes on to explain that “what the 2004 declaration did was elevate indigenous-Mestizo culture to a position of equality with the Mestizo Mexico,” which for him includes many European influences.

This wording, in short, seems to suggest both a separate character for “indigenous-Mestizo culture” and also its fundamental identity with that of “Mestizo Mexico” partly based on its European historical and cultural experience. Under this formulation the whole concept of “cultural *mestizaje*” begins to look excessively vague. MacLachlan does, however, make clear his preference for a cultural over a biological definition of *mestizaje*. “Biology,” he writes, “is less important than the acceptance of a culture introduced by

the imperial power mixed with elements from Indo-Mexican culture.”

Yet before biology is sidelined, it should be pointed out that biological differences were important, in that they facilitated the processes of classification by the conquerors that gave rise to racial and ethnic prejudice. Medieval and early modern Spain, in common with the Europe of the times, was obsessively concerned with notions of genealogy and “bloodline,” and wove a mental universe around them. Carrying these notions across the Atlantic, Spaniards encountered peoples who were previously quite unknown to Europeans and who could not automatically be slotted into preexisting categories. In the circumstances they naturally made use of such conceptions as they had to hand. The end result was that the mass of the indigenous population of the Americas was allotted its own specific and subordinate place in a Spanish-imposed ethnic hierarchy.

Almost as soon as an exact classification of the Indian population had been devised, however, the effects of biological *mestizaje* began to impose themselves. The divisions between the so-called “republic of the Indians” and the “republic of the Spaniards” were soon eroded by the growth of a genetically mixed population. In due course, too, rapidly growing numbers of imported African slaves were added to the melting pot.

Ethnic and racial classification, constructed on the basis of real or presumed physical and other characteristics, exercised a powerful hold over viceregal New Spain. This was an acutely caste-conscious society, in which the boundaries of each *casta* would be meticulously delineated in the famous sets of eighteenth-century Mexican *casta* paintings, more than a hundred of which are known. Yet the gulf between the image and the reality constantly widened, as racial classification found itself competing with the social, economic, and cultural determinants of status. In the process, classification by race became itself subject to modification, with the consequence, for example, that a dark skin could be reclassified as white, for instance by the purchase of a certificate from the crown.

Whatever the respective weighting to be given to biological as against cultural *mestizaje*—and this will surely vary over time and space—MacLachlan’s interest is in the latter, and in the way in which it was shaped by the imperial enterprise. He has clearly thought much about the nature of empire, and he detects fundamental similarities in the evolution of empires, with “religion and language” being “perhaps the two most important cultural elements in that they express a unique consciousness that governs all else.”

This belief in a similarity of evolutionary processes informs his book, the purpose of which, as he describes it, is to set out

Indo-Mexico’s evolution alongside that of Euro-Spain, so that their amalgamation in the Mexican

\*University of California Press, 1988. Additional footnotes appear in the Web version of this review at [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com)



setting can be better understood. In a macro sense, Hispano-Indo-Mexico became an heir to a lengthy historical process including early Iberian tribalism, Rome, the Visigoths, Spanish Islam, Judaism, and Western civilization, in general.

Historians of Spain's "empire of the Indies" have long been interested in the ways in which the experience of medieval Spain, and in particular its encounter with Islam in the long process of the Reconquista of the Iberian peninsula from the Moors, dictated the methods and the manner of its conquest and colonization of America. The story has indeed been pushed further back, to the time when Spain was a province of the Roman Empire. There is therefore nothing especially novel about the intent behind MacLachlan's undertaking. The obvious questions that arise are how far he has been able to bring new insights to bear from his comparative study of empires, and how far it succeeds in giving us a fresh understanding of the emergence of cultural *mestizaje* in what he rather tiresomely calls "Indo-Mexico."

One can only admire the range of his reading in the history of several civilizations, and the scope of his ambition in attempting what might be described as a "macrohistory" of the origins of Mexican culture. Although he is keen, as a comparative historian, to show the similarities in the evolution of his chosen empires from tribalism to a Spanish "imperial chieftancy" based on strict social hierarchy, he is also ready, like any good comparative historian, to identify important differences, as

in his treatment of religion, where he has valuable points to make about the similarities and the differences between Indo-Mexican and Christian theology. "The creation and the end of the world," he tells us, "constituted the two pillars of belief" in both, but he also points out that "Christianity, with its roots in Greek and Roman logic, represented a different way of thinking from that underpinning Indo-Mexican theology."

The result, he suggests, is that Indo-Mexicans, unable to reinterpret their gods rationally, were incapable of making major modifications to their worldview when new conquests involved the need to incorporate new gods with contradictory characteristics into an already crowded pantheon. This in turn could explain why, among the Mexican people, or "Mexica," "human sacrifice took on a desperate extravagance that matched their unarticulated frustrations, eventually mounting to unsustainable levels on the eve of the European arrival."

Other suggestions of a comparative nature seem to me less convincing, as when he claims that "Mesoamerica in the late fifteenth century verged on a commercial revolution along the lines of medieval Europe in 1000–1300." Mesoamerican economic life was distorted by a tribute system involving the compulsory regular dispatch to Tenochtitlán of vast quantities of regional commodities, such as cacao, cotton, turquoise, copper, and feathers for cloaks and other purposes. For all the importance of markets and of the corporate group of merchants, it is hard to see the same kind of transformative influences at work as in medieval Eu-

rope with its increasingly self-confident and assertive urban civilization. These, however, are matters of opinion. More important is the degree to which MacLachlan's treatment of his subject helps him to realize his ambitious aim of incorporating the history of a variety of civilizations, stretching over many centuries, into a coherent picture that illuminates the origins of Mexican culture.

Unfortunately his chosen method does not seem to me to achieve its purpose. His book is divided into four chapters, examining in turn Mesoamerican civilization, the formation of "Euro-Spanish" culture, Moors and Christians, and the creation of Mestizo Mexico. All these chapters are informative in themselves, but as is to be expected of a work of synthesis, the information is hardly new, and the organization of the book into discrete divisions prevents it from building up a sustained argument. The handling of the chapters, too, slides uneasily between historical summary and historical commentary, and sometimes we are left wondering about the story that is being told.

In a discussion of early Christianity, for instance, it is suggested that "the death of paganism was not sudden or complete. Christianity was not inevitable." This seems unexceptionable, but the comment is preceded by a brief reference to the Jewish revolt of AD 66, which ends with the assertion that "a Jewish revolutionary nationalist, Jesus of Nazareth, was crucified for sedition." Not only does MacLachlan's account suggest considerable chronological confusion, but his depiction of

Jesus is taken from the famously controversial work of Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, and is here treated as if it were an established truth. The endnote, which indeed refers to Aslan's book, simply informs us about the circumstances in which crucifixion was used.

It may be wondered, in any event, why the revolt in Judea should appear at all in a book on the origins of Mexican culture, but this is only one of many occasions in which it seems to wander into irrelevancy. A one-paragraph reference to the epidemics that so drastically reduced the indigenous population of post-conquest Mexico is preceded by nearly three pages on Eurasian plague epidemics, starting with the 430 BC epidemic in Athens. It is hard to see why the author should have felt this to be necessary, and his frequent descent into detail that seems only remotely related to the subject under discussion makes for opaque and distracting reading. The final impression is of a book that is rich in ambition and sometimes suggestive in the parallels that it draws between civilizations, but one that lacks a clear focus.

This is unfortunate, because, buried beneath all the detail and commentary, an important theme is struggling to get out. MacLachlan's prime concern is with acculturation, both of Roman and medieval Spaniards and of sixteenth-century Mesoamericans. This is a theme that has long attracted the interest of anthropologists and historians, and one that has proved particularly fruitful in illuminating the history of post-conquest Mexico. The story includes the attempted imposition of one

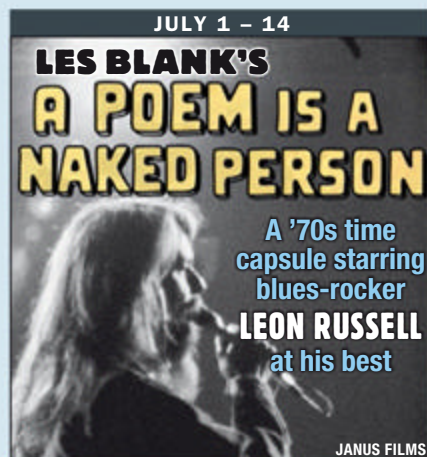
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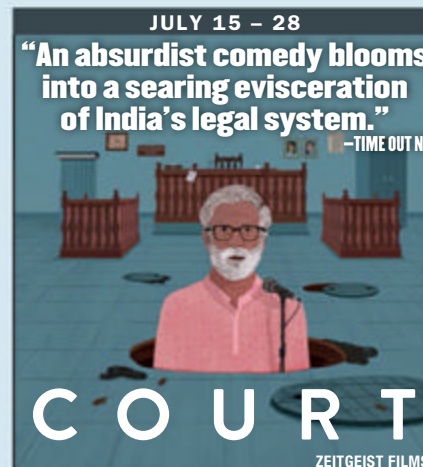
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culture on another through the assertion of imperial power, the process of cultural transfer, the extent to which a “submerged” culture manages to survive, and the degree to which the dominant culture is itself changed by its encounter with that of another civilization. These are all themes of which MacLachlan is well aware, but he does not succeed in constructing a coherent account or explanation of them.

## 2.

Perhaps the challenge is simply too great, given the number and variety of cultural transfers, the vast areas they covered, and the changes they underwent over time. Yet the theme itself is unendingly rich, and the potential for future discoveries is great. Just how great is suggested by an outstanding new book that covers the viceroyalty of Peru as well as that of New Spain, and confines itself strictly to the visual arts. *Painting in Latin America, 1550–1820*—not the happiest of titles for a volume devoted to Hispanic viceregal America—is an exceptionally handsome book, originally produced by Ediciones El Viso in Madrid, and illustrated with some 370 color images, many of them never before reproduced. The illustrations in themselves are likely to come as a revelation to readers, without even taking into account the high quality of the accompanying essays.

While Iberian-American art has been the subject of numerous surveys over the last fifty or sixty years, its study has acquired a new momentum during the past two decades, and its popularity has been enhanced by a number of striking exhibitions in major museums on both sides of the Atlantic, although not all museum directors have responded with enthusiasm to the idea of displaying works of art that they regard as “provincial,” and hence in some way inferior.

In the United States the promotion of research in this field, and the large-scale reassessment of paintings that have traditionally been excluded from the art-historical canon, have been led by one of this volume’s two editors, Jonathan Brown, professor of fine arts at New York University, who has recently described his intellectual trajectory from the study of Spanish art to that of Spanish-American art in his engaging semi-autobiography, *In the Shadow of Velázquez*.

The volume he has edited with the Spanish art historian Luisa Elena Alcalá consists of eleven essays by seven authors, including the two editors themselves, with one author, Luis Eduardo Wuffarden, taking responsibility for all but one of the six essays on Peruvian art. The resulting book is important, not only for what is likely to be the relative novelty of the topic to a majority of readers, but also for the way the subject is treated. The editors have selected their contributors not only for their technical expertise but also for their willingness to reconsider and reinterpret Hispanic-American painting in the light of an overarching theme—the nature and methods of cultural diffusion in the first age of globalization. The result is a book that, while containing much new information about recently identified artists and paintings, also makes a valuable contribution to the broad topic of cultural transfer.

While one or two art historians, especially Latin Americans, have emphasized the originality and unique characteristics of many of the works emerging from such viceregal centers of artistic production as Mexico City, Lima, and Quito, the conventional approach has been to see them as derivative and provincial, and as inferior versions of the works of European masters. The method of diffusion tended to be informed by a center-periphery model. It worked not only by means of the migration to the New World of European artists, bringing with them their own skills and tastes, but also by a large-scale transatlantic export trade in paint-

Kaufmann, the editors prefer a model based on cultural fields or spheres. Spanish art itself thus becomes an amalgam of stylistic influences, notably from the Netherlands and Italy, both of them constituent parts or spheres of influence of the dominions of Charles V, Philip II, and their successors on the Spanish throne. These stylistic influences are then transmitted to Spain’s American empire, where, more by chance than design, Flemish images and styles, notably those of Rubens, tend to be dominant in Mexico while Italianate influences prevail in Peru.

Once transmitted, the images are then appropriated for different pur-

ized identity that guaranteed them a superior status to that of the common Indian.” The Inca nobility, however, was to show more staying power than the Mexican, and sometimes nobles of Indian descent, particularly in the Andean region, themselves became artists.

Traditional indigenous art forms, most notably the feather paintings for which Mesoamerica was renowned, survived the conquest, but were placed at the disposal of European patrons, headed by the church and the religious orders. This inevitably meant an imposition of European themes and styles, at a time when indigenous painters were also having to compete with European artists who had no use for indigenous forms. Yet at least in the Cuzco region of Peru, indigenous iconographic elements like the rich ornamentation of pre-conquest Andean textiles succeeded in holding their own against European elements, and the Cuzco school was to show a remarkable inventiveness and creativity, not least in the paintings of archangels armed with arquebuses for which it is famed.

The overwhelming impression created by this splendid book, however, is of the inventiveness of Hispanic-American painters—indigenous, creole (i.e., immigrant Europeans and their white descendants), and those of mixed ancestry—in amalgamating styles and techniques imported not only from Europe but also from the Far East, from where porcelain, silks, and folding screens were shipped by the Manila galleons from the Philippines, a remote extension of the viceroyalty of New Spain.

Faced with this medley of works and influences, they then devised their own collective and individual responses, bringing to bear on those responses their own belief systems and visual vocabulary. In one of the most fascinating chapters in the book, devoted to mural painting in the churches of the Andes, Hiroshige Okada questions the whole concept of “mestizo art,” on the grounds that it presupposes an “Indian self” and “indigenous sensibility,” whereas the indigenous community was itself culturally divided between the elites who had access to European art and appropriated it over the course of three centuries to suit their own tastes and purposes, and a passive population that became conditioned to the art imposed by the imperial power.

In view of the diversity of situations and responses, “cultural *mestizaje*” begins to seem too limited and restrictive a term to describe the complex processes involved in cultural transfer. The same is even more true of those other terms so frequently employed, “acculturation,” and “deculturation.” The cultures of Hispanic America were all, in their varied forms, cultures of imposition, appropriation, and adaptation. But it is sufficient to look at a Mesoamerican feather painting of *The Mass of St. Gregory* (1539), or *Triumph of the Eucharist* (1686) by the greatest artist produced by viceregal Mexico, Cristóbal de Villalpando, or the portrait of an Inca noble by an anonymous Cuzco artist, to appreciate how the fusion of styles, techniques, and belief systems could create works of extraordinary originality. In the sixteenth century the world came to “Indo-America,” and, in the centuries that followed, a biologically mixed civilization appropriated that world and made it uniquely its own. □



*'Archangel Harquebusier'; by an anonymous Cuzco artist, circa 1690–1720. As Luis Eduardo Wuffarden writes in Painting in Latin America, 'harquebusier archangels constituted another clear local contribution to religious iconography. Unlike the warrior angels of Europe, who appear armed in the manner of ancient Romans, the winged figures of the Andean world carry firearms and wear contemporary costumes in the style of royal guards.'*

ings and prints from Seville. These were then diligently copied by creole, indigenous, and mestizo artists and artisans.

The editors and contributors to this volume demonstrate the inadequacy of this model, with its implications of an artistic hierarchy. They also question the whole notion of provincialism that underlies it, which assumes the existence of national artistic styles—Spanish, Flemish, Italian—that provide the inspiration for provincial centers. In reality artistic styles transcended national boundaries, especially in an age of empires and composite monarchies. Instead, following a model originally proposed by Thomas DaCosta

poses, by different patrons and artists in different places and different ways. Indigenous artisans were quick to learn European techniques, although this seems to have been accomplished more easily in New Spain—in Mexico and Central America—than in Peru, which lacked Mexico’s pre-conquest pictographic tradition, combining picture and text. One of the many valuable contributions of the book, indeed, is to illustrate and explain some of the striking differences between Mexican and Peruvian viceregal painting. In both viceroyalties the post-conquest indigenous nobility acted as cultural intermediaries, “preserving indigenous social values and beliefs in some form while championing a kind of Hispan-

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# A Passionate Master

Peter N. Miller

## La République des lettres

by Marc Fumaroli.

Paris: Gallimard,  
480 pp., €25.00 (paper)

### 1.

On July 6, 1417, the Venetian nobleman Francesco Barbero sent a laudatory letter to Gian Francesco Poggio Bracciolini, secretary to the Antipope John XXIII and a leading humanist of his time. Barbero praised Poggio's extraordinary success in ferreting out ancient texts from their moldering monastic hiding places while in Germany for the Council of Constance, to which Poggio had come along with the pope.

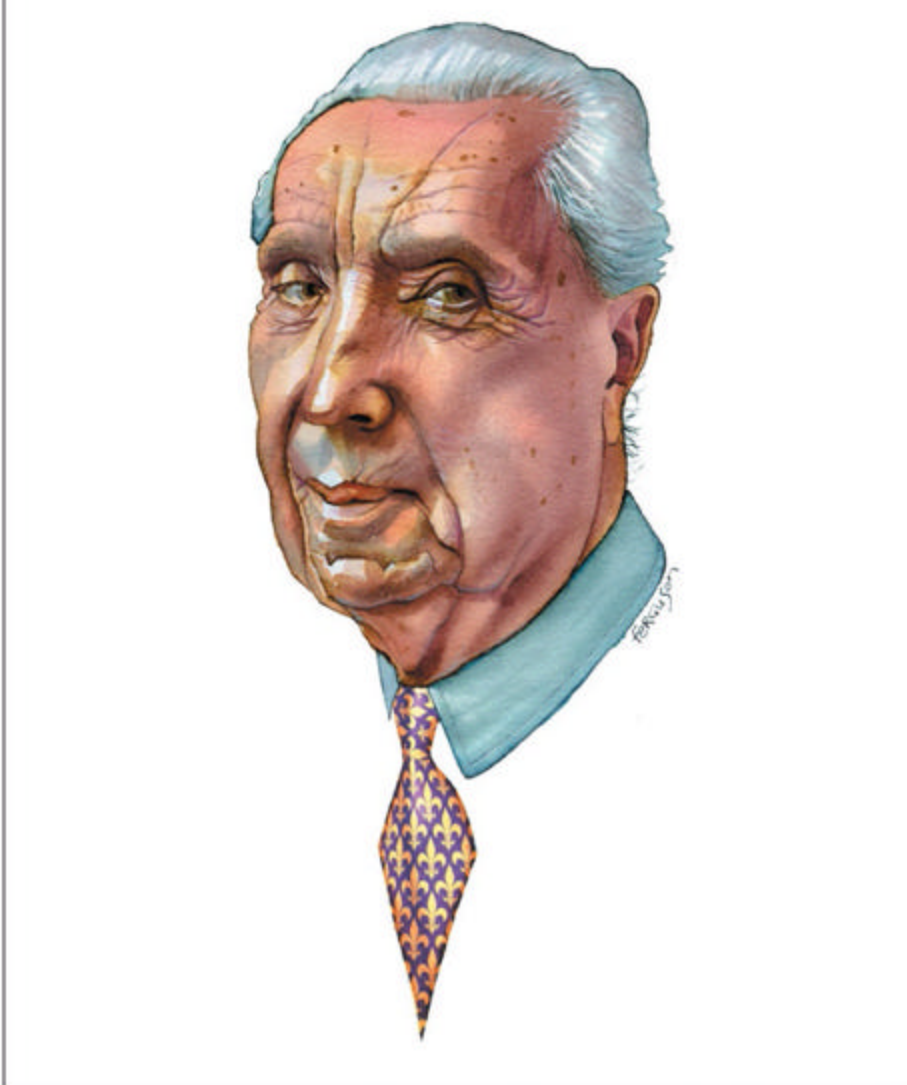
This letter, with its congratulations to Poggio on finding the work of such important writers as Tertullian and Lucretius, said that he deserved immortal glory in the “republic of letters.” Marc Fumaroli, now the leading French historian of Renaissance intellectual history, observes that this is the first use of the phrase “republic of letters”—*respublica litteraria*. It referred to the small group of Renaissance scholars who were engaged in rediscovering, reinterpreting, and enlarging on important Latin and Greek texts. In doing so, as Fumaroli and others have argued, they formed a new kind of community that did much to define the Renaissance and the ways of thinking that led to “modern” culture.

Despite the prominence of the term “republic of letters” in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the Huguenot encyclopedist and philosopher Pierre Bayle called his journal *News from the Republic of Letters*—it has only recently had serious attention in France, Italy, and Germany, as well as the United States and United Kingdom. The subject has grown in importance as a way of understanding why the period in Europe from 1500 to 1800 is so important. No one has contributed more to this shift in perspective than Marc Fumaroli.

Fumaroli was born in Marseille in 1932, spent his childhood in Fez, in Morocco, his teenage years in Marseille, and was then educated at the University of Aix-en-Provence and at the Sorbonne. He began his teaching career in Lille before moving to Paris in 1976. He has remained there, first at the Sorbonne, and since 1986 at the Collège de France. In 1995 he was elected to the Académie française, that would-be modern Parnassus created by Cardinal Richelieu in 1635 to honor the heroes of French learning. He has written or edited twenty books, the best known of which are commentaries on recent cultural politics in France or collections of texts such as *L'État culturel* (1991) and *When the World Spoke French* (2001; translation, 2011). In these books Fumaroli criticizes the present identity and cultural shallowness of France from the perspective of its past. But in most of his work he writes as a scholar speaking to other scholars.

Fumaroli is the most sure-footed guide we have to high culture in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France. His works explore three main themes: the uses of classical rhetoric in the late Re-

Marc Fumaroli



naissance, the century-long so-called Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, and the Republic of Letters.

What is perhaps his greatest book, *L'Âge de l'éloquence* (1980), is a vast study of how ancient rhetorical theory was rediscovered and adapted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We may think of rhetoric as the superficial art of using words, but in Greek and Roman antiquity, rhetoric was a system of exposition—a way of structuring what one wanted to express—as well as, implicitly, a way of organizing knowledge. The orator had to have an encyclopedic command of both historical and literary sources and the range of emotions he could draw on. The study of rhetoric was intended to explain how an audience responds and why. While rhetoric was practiced in Imperial Rome, the system was developed for argument in the law courts and senate of the republic. Its most famous and influential practitioner and theorist was Cicero, who was killed in the wave of executions following the murder of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE.

Fumaroli begins by surveying ancient texts on rhetoric. But when he turns toward the present he chooses a distinctive and telling event: the sixteenth-century debate about Cicero. On the one hand, there were his Italian imitators who were so drawn to the classical past that they used only the Latin words he used. On the other, there was the argument of Erasmus of Rotterdam, that were Cicero alive in the sixteenth century he would have been among those who wanted to update language and draw on the ver-

nacular. Erasmus pointed to Cicero's own concept of decorum, the idea that expression and expressiveness needed to conform to the time and place of exposition.

Fumaroli follows these two positions as examples of the debate that took place in Europe between “ancients” and “moderns,” and he describes their permutations, among Jesuits, jurists, politicians, and princes of the Church in Counter-Reformation Italy and early-seventeenth-century France. Not only did the debate create the foundation for the literary achievements of the century of Louis XIV—the plays of Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine, for example—but it also led to the modern notion of “literature” and “literary studies.”

Fumaroli also probed into the visual and theatrical culture of this period. He showed how the same debates about how to update classical rhetorical theory for modern times influenced painting in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in Italy and France. Like the great scholars of the Warburg school, Fumaroli's familiarity with early modern ways of thinking enabled him to discern patterns, structures, and meanings derived from classical texts beneath the swirling figures in the paintings of the Italian Guido Reni, or the silent, cold subjects in those of the Frenchman Nicolas Poussin. He analyzed painting as a theater of the emotions.

Fumaroli has been particularly astute in understanding the theater of Corneille as a vocabulary of gestures derived from a variety of classical and contemporary sources. Fumaroli presents him not only as a successful playwright, but as a kind of transform-

ing vehicle of culture in whose work Italy's arts, its politics of “reason of state,” its Jesuit erudition, and its rhetorical styles are carefully distilled into something that seemed so French that, in turn, it set the standard for the next generation of French writers.

As Fumaroli shows, the supporters of the new absolutist state of Louis XIV were also among those who wanted to push the boundaries of acceptable style in new directions. Against this background Fumaroli takes up the politics behind the famous Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, which broke out with the publication of two books by Charles Perrault—*The Century of Louis the Great* (1687) and *Parallels of the Ancients and the Moderns* (1688). Fumaroli connects the later seventeenth century in France back to the debates over the classical heritage during the sixteenth century in Italy. He argues that the relationships between works of culture, political authority, and the influence of the past on the present lie at the heart of modern European culture.\*

If there is a geographical momentum to Fumaroli's history of rhetoric, it could be called “out of Italy.” The enormous presence of antiquity in the physical remains of the past—as with Rome's Aurelian walls or the ruins on the Palatine Hill—had been visible throughout the Middle Ages. But what emerged during the fifteenth century was a new idea of antiquity as a model for living better. People could conduct relations with one another by drawing on examples from Cicero, Virgil, Horace, or Homer. This new approach, for the most part, coexisted with Christian religious authority; most of those whom Fumaroli considers were able to accommodate Christian ideas of faith to pagan ideas of living. But the new idea of antiquity set off shock waves that spread across the Continent during the sixteenth and on into the seventeenth centuries.

Fumaroli considers how these waves rolled across France, how they collided with native traditions in painting, literature, and architecture, and how they shaped France in the centuries before the French Revolution. Some aspects of the Revolution itself could be considered aftershocks from the great change—the revolution in the understanding of the classical past—that we call the Italian Renaissance.

The reencounter with the ancient world began with coins and buildings and manuscripts, but it soon spread to daily life in the distant past—clothing, food, religion, calendars, law. These, in turn, began to change the ways in which modern people lived in the world. Dress, speech, comportment—all that we might subsume under the notion of

\*See Marc Fumaroli, *L'Âge de l'éloquence: rhétorique et “res litteraria” de la Renaissance au seuil de l'époque classique* (Geneva: Droz, 1980); *Héros et orateurs: rhétorique et dramaturgie cornéliennes* (Geneva: Droz, 1990); *L'École du silence: le sentiment des images au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994). Additional footnotes can be found in the Web version of this review at [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com).



personal style—began to show the impact of antiquity.

The pressure of the past created the new forms and practices of life that are Fumaroli's principal subject. He might have chosen to explore it by focusing on Michel de Montaigne, who expressed himself in a genre of his own devising that is both a monument to and a document of the conversion of old texts into new forms. Fumaroli wrote a beautiful essay about this aspect of Montaigne, but only one. It is almost as if he was arguing that there were darker corners more in need of illumination. His studies of the translation and reception in later seventeenth-century France of the Spanish Jesuit Baltasar Gracián show Gracián as having the kind of insight and importance that others assign to Montaigne.

## 2.

Just how did antiquity shape living? This is the question that permeates Fumaroli's essays in *La République des lettres*. "Republic" was an ancient word with dense and various meanings. But when fifteenth-century scholars used the term "letters" (*litterae* or *litteraria*) what exactly did they mean? Fumaroli turns for help to the prefaces written at the end of the fifteenth century by the scholarly Venetian printer Aldus Manutius. Aldus (or Aldo, in Italian) produced beautiful editions of the Greek and Roman classics, often the first time any of them had been printed. He cut type, inventing italics. (His achievement as a single-handed reviver of antiquity was recently the subject of a stirring exhibition at the Grolier Club in New York.)

It was Aldus, according to Fumaroli, who also helped develop the very terms in which the revival of classical learning would perpetuate itself. For example, he identified his audience as the "students of good letters" (*studiosi bonarum litterarum*) and "most loving of good letters" (*amantissimi bonarum litterarum*). For Aldus, his writers and their readers, "letters"—literature in our sense, but also ancient learning of all sorts—represented a vision of a better future. "I hope that in a near future," he wrote, "with barbarism destroyed and ignorance vanquished, good letters and the true disciplines will be embraced not, as they are now, by a tiny minority, but by universal accord."

Those "lovers of good letters," however, had to confront an ancient dichotomy between *otium*, generally translated as "ease," or "pleasure," and its opposite, *negotium*, from which we get our modern "negotiation," but which more precisely means "engagement with the world." While *otium* may have seemed an appropriate aristocratic response to base practicalities, the Romans of the late republic, like Cicero, viewed it as a kind of dereliction of duty. Hence study, which from the outside could look very like abstention from the life of the community, had to be "saved" from the association with purely personal pleasure. "Ease with dignity" (*otium cum dignitate*) was the ancient answer, so that learning represented legitimate care of the self. In this debate about *otium* and duty we can see the formation of the idea of citizenship that animates modern politics.

If part of being a citizen is belonging to a community, then communication

is essential. Fumaroli identifies citizenship of the republic of letters with "conversation." We may take this word for granted, but much serious thinking was devoted to its meaning and scope in the sixteenth century. Conversation referred not just to the ways people spoke but to much else: how talking fitted in with one's life; the places of such talk; the societies that were created to carry on such talk. Written letters, which facilitated the conversation of absent friends, preserved the importance of dialogue even as they developed their own rules.

Bound up in "conversation" were the values at the core of a new and decidedly nonclerical and nongovernmental sphere of life. Hegel later used the term "civil society" to refer to what members of the republic of letters wrote about as "civil conversation"—conversation



Marc Fumaroli, Paris, March 2009; photograph by Dominique Nabokov

outside the bounds of bureaucracies and official conclaves. Conversation was a kind of performance and was often depicted as such: Cesare Ripa, for example, who published a frequently reprinted book about visual messages, *Iconologia* (1593), included a figure of "Conversation." And when the book was republished in mid-eighteenth-century Germany with new engravings, it also came out with a new image: a "Modern Conversation" that reflected a century's change in thinking and living. Watteau's series of "Conversation" paintings do the same with much greater subtlety.

## 3.

Fumaroli sees in the revival of ancient rhetoric a force that reshaped social norms. Those who studied the ancient world and made possible this cultural revolution were also transformed by the practice of study. A life in letters could be a form of self-fashioning. We know, for instance, that Poggio's Florentine correspondent Niccolò Niccoli was famous for the beauty of his dishes, clothing, and house. We know that Donatello designed interior spaces in which meetings for conversation could take place and that Pomponio Leto, later in the fifteenth century, celebrated the ancient Roman holidays with his friends in the new Rome.

To these well-known examples, in one of the longest essays in his book, Fumaroli adds the Provençal humanist Nicolas Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637). Through his study of Peiresc Fumaroli shows how, during the seventeenth century, a life devoted to "letters" became

a cultural ideal. Drawing on Peiresc's vast network of correspondents, Fumaroli evokes his commitment to collaboration and communication, to generosity and hospitality, to tolerating difference and avoiding angry disagreement. Peiresc, he shows, created a model of citizenship for the republic of letters as a whole.

Peiresc lived in Provence, along the major routes from Italy into France, and he was active at the crucial moment when the most innovative adaptations of antiquity into modern culture were beginning to occur not in Italy but in France during the first part of the seventeenth century. Peiresc was an astronomer, an antiquarian, a historian of Provence, an indefatigable writer to other members of the Republic of Letters. His career is crucial for

understanding the broader relationship between the movements of thought we call the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. His work and his relations with others also define the particular classicism of seventeenth-century French culture.

Fumaroli locates a tipping point in the 1620s, just after Peiresc left Paris. For that brief moment there coexisted, in equipoise, an erudite, Latin-speaking, male republic of letters in the learned circle that gathered daily in the "cabinet" of the brothers Pierre and Jacques Dupuy, and a French-speaking, mixed-gender, more literary milieu that packed the "blue room" of Catherine de Vivonne, Marquise de Rambouillet. In the group who met with the Dupuys there assembled Peiresc's friends and Poggio's heirs; in the "blue room" there were men and women who knew little about Peiresc and even less about philology. They were, however, keen on new forms of writing and speaking while they had also absorbed something of the classical renewal that had been going on around them. They wanted to cut a figure in the world of contemporary society—in both the court and the city, to borrow Erich Auerbach's terms.

In short, this was the time of the birth of the salon, and the beginning of the trajectory that led to the coffeehouse, the magazine, the public gardens, and the museums of the eighteenth century. These developments can all be closely tied to the rise of commercial society, the novel, and new kinds of history-writing. It was a momentous transformation that occurred before the French Revolution and throughout Europe, and it has justifiably engaged some of the twentieth

century's most influential thinkers and historians, among them Franco Venturi and Reinhart Koselleck. Fumaroli's work belongs alongside theirs.

## 4.

In 1954, the young François Furet, who was to turn upside down the interpretation of the French Revolution, passed the *agrégation*, the national examination for entry into the ranks of advanced teachers in France. The president of the reviewing committee was the great historian Fernand Braudel. It was five years after the publication of his epochal book on the Mediterranean and four after his election to the Collège de France. When Braudel asked what Furet wanted to work on, he answered, "The French Revolution." Braudel shook his head: "Don't we know all that already?"

Packed into Braudel's statement of doubt was the certainty of a dominant historical explanation—that of social and economic history—and a dominant historiographical tradition—that of the *Annales*, the legendary journal founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in the previous generation. In the space of Furet's career that entire structure of certainty was put in doubt. If the current generation of historians now emphasizes the power of ideas in causing the Revolution, and rejects Marxisms both dogmatic and sophisticated, this can be traced, in large part, to Furet's work. The French eighteenth century has become a different country.

Fumaroli has done the same for the early seventeenth century. If he is less famous than Furet, this has to do with the fame of Fumaroli's chosen period, which mostly lacks the powerful presence of Louis XIV's Versailles or the Revolution. Yet Fumaroli has almost single-handedly made the intellectual history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in France necessary for understanding those later, more glamorous periods. For him, as for Chateaubriand and Tocqueville, the ancien régime had declined and fallen long before the Revolution broke out. Men like the Comte de Caylus, another of Fumaroli's subjects, saw in antiquity the means to reform the present.

Fumaroli is attracted to such figures. They unsettle the conventional dichotomy between progressive and conservative. If we look at his own work, not only his explicit criticism of the often stultifying contemporary cultural bureaucracy in France, but his fascination with the erudite Latin culture of clerics, jurists, and austere humanists, we see a similar resistance to convention. Like them, Fumaroli sees himself in dialogue with long-dead writers and thinkers and draws on them for ideas. Like Nietzsche's, many of Fumaroli's essays could be subtitled "untimely meditations."

Braudel once wrote an alluring but flawed essay called in English "Out of Italy." If Furet eventually demonstrated how mistaken Braudel was about the French Revolution, Fumaroli has written the "Out of Italy" that Braudel could not. Braudel introduced his love for the Mediterranean as the love of a northerner, from Lorraine, for a south as mythical as it was for Goethe when he came down from the Brenner Pass and beheld the Po Valley below. Fumaroli contrasts the "vivid colors" of the



south with a northern Italy “by definition less flamboyant, more reserved, more economical.” This is not mythology. Fumaroli is himself a man of the south. As with many great scholars, his personal inclinations have become a kind of divining rod for research. What is powerful about Fumaroli’s work, whether on Peiresc or Chateaubriand, and very much in the spirit of their own, is a barely concealed hint of

passion, especially the passion to know and to understand.

Caylus, in the preface to the second of the six volumes of his *Collection of Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek and Roman Antiquities*, gave an account of this scholar’s passion that is still valid today. The scholar, he wrote,

examines ancient remains; he compares them with those already

known; he researches their divergence or conformity; he reflects; he discusses; he formulates the conjectures that the distance in time and the silence of writers makes necessary. If one of these fragments offers ideas about the workings of art, either neglected, lost or rejected by the Moderns, the pleasure of experimenting, of describing them, energizes him and flatters his taste.

But nothing is comparable to the satisfaction of envisioning some usefulness for the public. This idea penetrates him; it touches his heart, and the happiness of succeeding amply compensates him for all his cares and all his pains. Voilà, I declare, the things that have seduced me.

# A Tragic Heroine of the Reading Room

Fiona MacCarthy

## Eleanor Marx: A Life

by Rachel Holmes.  
Bloomsbury, 508 pp., \$35.00

On Thursday, March 31, 1898, a few weeks after her strenuous involvement as campaign manager and fund-raiser for a lengthy strike of British engineers, Eleanor Marx instructed her maid Gerty to unwrap her favorite white dress from the tissue wrapping in which it had been packed away for winter. The dress was white muslin, a flimsy material for an English spring. In the middle of the morning she sent Gerty to the pharmacy close to her suburban south London house with a prescription for two ounces of chloroform and an eighth of an ounce of prussic acid. It was Gerty who, later in the morning, found her mistress stretched out on the bed dressed in the white muslin, mottled blue with the effects of prussic acid poisoning. Most of her friends and socialist colleagues believed she had died for hopeless love.

Hers was a death to rival that of *Madam Bovary* in its despairing histrionics, its intensity of passion. In fact Eleanor Marx, a fine linguist, had been commissioned in 1885 to translate Gustave Flaubert’s novel into English. Julian Barnes plays brilliantly with the parallels in a spoof exam paper invented for his book *Flaubert’s Parrot*:

E1 led a life of sexual irregularity....  
E2 led a life of sexual irregularity....  
E1 committed suicide by swallowing prussic acid.  
E2 committed suicide by swallowing arsenic.

E1 was Eleanor Marx.  
E2 was Emma Bovary.  
The first English translation of *Madame Bovary* to be published was by Eleanor Marx.  
Discuss.

Rachel Holmes’s is not the first substantial life history of Karl Marx’s youngest daughter. Both Chushichi Tsuzuki’s pioneering biography of 1967 and Yvonne Kapp’s devotedly detailed two-volume *Eleanor Marx* (1972 and 1976) depicted her not simply as Karl Marx’s youngest daughter, secretary, chief assistant, editor, biographer, and general keeper of the Marxist flame. Both books showed Eleanor Marx as

a charismatic and influential figure in nineteenth-century international socialist politics on her own account.

Nor is Holmes the only writer to address the glaring contradictions in the splendor of the life of the political activist and feminist and the final suburban pathos of her death. The feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham as far back as 1982, in a fine introduction to *The Daughters of Karl Marx*, a collection of the family’s correspondence, pointed out the “disjuncture between the public Eleanor, the brilliant and hard-headed socialist writer, speaker and organizer, and the private Eleanor” whose political loyalties, sexual needs, and indeed protective Jewish maternal instincts bound her to a socialist comrade lover, Edward Aveling, a confidence trickster and a womanizer on an epic scale. This is the disjuncture followed through by Rachel Holmes in her large and unashamedly partisan biography.

Eleanor Marx tumbles prematurely into the world in London at the moment before dawn on Tuesday 16 January 1855. Puffing anxiously on a cigar in the corner of the overcrowded room at 28 Dean Street, Soho, is Europe’s greatest political scientist. Karl and Jenny Marx have another child.

They’d hoped for a boy.  
It’s a girl.

One quickly forgives Holmes for her rather bludgeoning narrative style. She has written a thrillingly revisionist book, energetically researched and convincing in its argument that Eleanor Marx’s life “was one of the most significant and interesting events in the evolution of social democracy in Victorian Britain,” leaving a substantial legacy for coming generations.

Holmes is vivid in her detailed description of the cramped and crowded, dusty, dirty, smoke-filled two rooms in Dean Street with their broken, tattered furniture and welcoming atmosphere of conspiratorial camaraderie. A multilingual household in which German, French, English, Dutch, and Yiddish merged. A family of many nicknames: of Eleanor’s two sisters, Jenny, then eleven, was “Jennychen” while moody ten-year-old Laura was renamed “Hottentot.” Baby Eleanor herself came to be known as “Tussy,” not—her parents would explain—to rhyme with “fussy” but with “pussy.” (“Tussy” has another, less reputable usage as a vernacular term for vagina.) The Marx house of fond diminutives was also a place of sexual secrets, as Eleanor was to discover much later in her life.

Her German-speaking mother Jenny described her as having been from infancy “eine Politikerin top to bottom.” Edgar, her only surviving brother, died from tuberculosis twelve weeks after Eleanor’s birth and after this she gradually filled the vacant role of son and heir. Tussy became the cosseted companion of her father, taking long walks with him, hearing the fairy tales that Karl Marx loved, absorbing the other worlds of the Arabian Nights and Grimm. She grew up to share Marx’s enthusiastic knowledge of Shakespeare and the theater. And from her father, who had first arrived in the safe haven of London in 1848, after a series of political adventures around the continent, she heard those more immediate real-life stories of revolutionary Europe in the turbulent decade before her birth.

Eleanor Marx had little formal education. What she learned she absorbed almost entirely from her father and his

collaborator and financial supporter Friedrich Engels, Eleanor’s literally angelic second father figure, “Uncle Angel” as she called him. It was Engels who urged Marx to start the great work of economic analysis and explanatory theory of historical materialism that became his definitive *Capital*. Painfully, laboriously, this was the work in progress throughout Eleanor’s formative years: “To say that Eleanor Marx grew up living and breathing historical materialism and socialism is therefore a literal description and not a metaphor.” Holmes reminds us that her intellectual closeness to her father gave her insights into economic theory that were totally unique for a woman of her time.

At the age of sixteen Eleanor was already embroiled in political activity. She was arrested by the police as she and her sister Jenny were traveling through France at the time of the uprising of the Paris Commune in spring 1871. This heroic uprising lasted for only two months but it remained historically significant as the only attempt to carry out a proletarian revolution in nineteenth-century Europe. Its opponents claimed it as an insurrection plotted by Karl Marx’s First International workers’ freedom organization. The Commune was significant as well for its reliance for defense on fighting revolutionary women, the Union des Femmes, the “bellicose viragos” of the barricades. In that it challenged the image of the docile supine woman, the Paris Commune was indeed “a great gender event.”

All three Marx daughters fell in love with revolutionary Frenchmen. Did Communard Paris have an erotic charge? Laura married the leading dissident Paul Lafargue; Jenny married Paul’s fellow activist Charles Longuet; the ardent young Eleanor formed a liaison with the already legendary Hippolyte Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, a tall, dark, handsome Basque from the Midi-Pyrenees who had fought heroically on the Paris barricades and escaped to London, having been condemned to death. Eleanor called him Lissa and surrendered her virginity. They became secretly engaged.

Defying her father, who disapproved of Lissa and indeed his other daughters’ revolutionary choices, the eighteen-year-old Eleanor went to live in Brighton on the south coast, setting out to support herself by teaching. But she had to return home again only five months later, distressed and anorexic. This became a kind of pattern identified by Holmes as an example of the Victorian feminine neurosis depicted



Eleanor Marx at the age of about sixteen, 1871



so effectively by Wilkie Collins, whom she describes as “that great expressionist of the effects of patriarchal repression and thwarted desire in intelligent, ambitious daughters.” Eleanor was removed to Karlsbad by Karl Marx to take the waters in that fashionable cosmopolitan spa town. Father and daughter, subsidized by Engels, stayed at the sociable Germania Hotel.

At the heart of Holmes’s book lies the fascinating theme of the dominating father. “Jenny is most like me, but Tussy is me,” Karl Marx would assert. It was only after Marx’s death in 1883 that Eleanor began to establish her own separate political identity. What made her so remarkable was not just her inherited cosmopolitanism of outlook, her Marxist grasp of economic theory, her indignation at labor injustices, and her involvement in the early days of the trade unions and the whole emergent nineteenth-century anticapitalist thrust. Her real importance lay in her sense of what women lacked to make them completely fulfilled people. It was Eleanor who added feminist thinking to that fundamental radical life question: “What is it that we as Socialists desire?”

The British Museum Reading Room has a special role in the history of nineteenth-century dissidence in London and the story of the Marx family in particular. It was the place where Marx himself so often took refuge from the hurly-burly of his household to pursue his studies. Its circular pan-technicon form encouraged sociability. Women and men sat alongside one another. “It was here,” Holmes tells us, “that Eleanor and her Victorian Bloomsbury group worked, flirted and subverted.” Eleanor was a distinctive figure with her dangling pince-nez and her uncorseted clothes. Beatrice Potter (the future Mrs. Sidney Webb) observed her disapprovingly as “dressed in a slovenly picturesque way.” But the relatively liberated British Library respected some conventions. Eleanor was indignant when told she could only read the *Kama Sutra* at a specially designated table under the librarian’s supervision. Why should different rules apply for women and for men?

The practiced flirter Edward Aveling approached her in the Reading Room soon after Marx’s death, claiming a false intimacy with her father and commissioning her to write two articles on Marx in *Progress*, the monthly magazine “of advanced thought” that he coedited. Aveling, the son of a distinguished intellectual Congregational minister, was a clever, hardworking academic who had specialized in zoology. He was an enthusiastic Darwinian, following the controversial theories on evolution in Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. He was passionately interested in the theater and, breaking out after an upbringing of rigorous solemnity, obsessive in pursuit of worldly pleasures.

Aveling was by no means prepossessing in appearance. He was short and shifty-looking. A spinal injury in childhood gave him a slight stoop. “Reptilian” was the word many people reached for in describing Aveling. George Bernard Shaw saw him as having “the face and eyes of a lizard, and no physical charm except a voice like a euphonium.” The Socialist leader Henry Hyndman pronounced simply,

“Nobody can be as bad as Aveling looks.” But Aveling was himself a consummate actor with the dangerous gift of empathy with women. When Shaw introduced himself to Eleanor in the Reading Room Aveling was watching from behind the book stacks, already willing to warn prospective rivals off.

“It is a curious fact that with every great revolutionary movement the question of ‘free love’ comes into the foreground.” This was a comment made by Eleanor’s mentor and supporter Friedrich Engels in an article he wrote for Aveling’s *Progress* magazine, an observation gathering in relevance as Eleanor and the already married Aveling made the decision to “set up” together, renting rooms at 55 Great Russell Street, directly opposite the British Museum, place of their first meeting. They moved in on July 18, 1884, Eleanor with some anxieties about the reactions of her sister Laura and her friends, telling people she would understand if they found her new situation unacceptable but asserting her right to independence of judgment: “You know I have the power very strongly developed of seeing things from the ‘other side.’” Eleanor had accepted the story Aveling told her that he had long been separated from his insufferable wife Bell. He could not marry Eleanor since Bell refused to divorce him on account of her religious beliefs.

In a book alive with interesting insights, Rachel Holmes makes much of Eleanor Marx’s pioneering work on Ibsen. She taught herself Norwegian in order to translate his plays, as her Socialist colleague William Morris learned Icelandic at a period of English rediscovery of Nordic culture. On Eleanor and Aveling’s quasi honeymoon in the Peak District in Derbyshire she arranged a reading of part of Ibsen’s then new and scandalous play *Ghosts*. As Holmes points out, “There are uncanny resonances between Ibsen’s *Ghosts* and the emotional underworld of Eleanor and Edward’s free-love union.... In the disastrous marriage plot, Captain Alving is damaged goods before Helen marries him.” Aveling’s own moral blankness was already obvious as he left the Nelson Arms after the “honeymoon” without settling the considerable bill.

In 1885 Eleanor and Aveling coauthored a pamphlet, *The Woman Question: From a Socialist Point of View*, published the following year in the *Westminster Review*. This collaboration has a certain irony in that Aveling so expertly and blatantly exploited women. “No woman seemed able to resist him,” said George Bernard Shaw resentfully, going on to use Aveling as the model for the morally degenerate doctor in his play *The Doctor’s Dilemma*. But of course it was just this underlying sense of insoluble problems in relations between the sexes that made *The Woman Question* so resonant and pertinent to emergent feminism of the 1870s. Eleanor Marx had come to realize from her own already agonizing sexual experience how vulnerable women are to their own bodies, to “the muscles, pulleys, levers and hormones designed to produce further life,” as Rachel Holmes describes them, as well as the social conditioning of her age.

Eleanor’s close relationships with other women informed her feminist

vision. Her most intimate friendship was with Olive Schreiner, the feminist South African writer and author of *The Story of an African Farm*. Holmes describes the two women as “like magnets.” She also suggests, though without providing evidence, that Eleanor was “secretly desired and adored” by May Morris, William Morris’s textile designer daughter who showered her with Morris furnishings and fabrics. Certainly Eleanor’s thinking on *The Woman Question* was affected profoundly by the researches of Olive Schreiner’s lover Henry Havelock Ellis, author of intrepidly liberated studies on female sexuality and desire.

A depth of psychological sexual understanding gives Eleanor’s political arguments for the emancipation of women particular forcefulness. She in-

Eleanor Marx



sists that modern society needs to talk openly on questions of sex:

Our children are constantly silenced when they ask about the begetting and the birth of offspring. The question is as natural as one about the beats of the heart or the movements of respiration.... To us, it seems that the reproductive organs ought to be discussed as frankly, as freely, between parents and children as the digestive. The objection to this is but a form of vulgar prejudice against the teaching of physiology.

As Holmes convincingly points out, Eleanor brings Freud and the fledgling discipline of psychoanalysis into the debate on the equality of women. In this she argues as a woman too, with an intelligence and empathy that links her back to Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century and forward to Virginia Woolf.

More than Wollstonecraft or Woolf, indeed more than her own father, Eleanor Marx was an activist. She was there flamboyantly at the center of the struggle to obtain the political power of the proletariat, organizing, cajoling, speaking publicly until (as it sometimes did) her voice gave out. By 1884 she had become a leader of a small, new, revolutionary socialist party, the Social Democratic Federation. Eleanor was at the organizational hub of the developing socialist movement in Britain, sitting on the SDF executive council alongside William Morris, her grasp of economics usefully counteracting his own lack of it. Morris, describing himself as “a poet and artist, good for nothing but sentiment,” confessed that “I want statistics terribly.”

When Morris broke away from the SDF to form his own political party, the Socialist League, Eleanor Marx and Aveling seceded with him. Morris admired Eleanor while remaining in awe of her. Powerful women tended to unnerve him. It is tempting to see her as the model for the glamorous warrior women in Morris’s late novels: Ursula in *The Well at the World’s End*, whose armor is worn over a fur jerkin with sleeves of green silk; Bird-alone in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, who is “armed in a light hauberk” having “covered up the lovely shapeliness of her legs with long boots of deer-leather.” Eleanor herself showed real courage in the mêlée as police violence against the socialist factions in London stepped up in the mid-1880s.

From 1887 onward she was involved directly in labor unrest. In London’s East End she was especially active in defense of Jewish workers. She led strikes of dock workers and gas workers in 1889, and sat for several years on the council of the National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers. We find Eleanor Marx addressing a crowd of a quarter of a million at the first May Day rally to be held in London in 1890. Mrs. Marx Aveling, as she styled herself, became a popular national figure, known fondly in trade union circles as “Our Mother” and even “Our Old Stoker.” Her great originality of thinking lay in her conflation of the rights of women with the rights of workers. For a laboring woman it was not a simple matter of campaigning for sexual equality. Eleanor had the intellectual breadth to comprehend that working women had to free themselves from capitalist oppression first.

By this time, Eleanor’s own inner strains were worsening. In 1886 she and Aveling had traveled to America, arriving in New York harbor on the liner *City of Chicago*. Their four-month speaking tour organized by the Socialistic Labor Party of America took them to fifteen states. Their mission to bring internationalist and feminist thinking to socialism in America was partially successful but was undermined by Aveling’s reckless self-indulgence, treating himself to upgrades in hotels and Pullman trains, buying corsages for his many female conquests, flouting abstinence laws in Prohibition states. In Rhode Island he ordered a bottle of champagne, reporting that “in ten minutes a bottle of Heidsieck was before me and, soon after, within.” On their return to England a damaging expenses scandal broke. Engels loyally defended Aveling from charges of swindling. But Eleanor’s old tendency to depression returned. It seems she made a first suicide attempt early in 1888.

The question is not only why Eleanor Marx eventually successfully ended her own life but how she had endured life with Aveling for so long. She depended on him sexually. Holmes impatiently reminds us how love had “made her stupid.” She relied on his political co-operation. Aveling may have been a blackguard. He was also a good socialist. Holmes at this point advances the interesting view that his ruthless self-centeredness fascinated Eleanor as being diametrically the opposite of her own generous self-abnegating nature.

Politically the 1890s were notably successful for Eleanor. Her speech at



the 1891 Brussels Congress of the International was widely praised. But her spirits were gradually undermined by a sequence of devastating revelations, unfolded by Holmes with the narrative twists of a nineteenth-century sensationalist novel.

First it emerged that the story Aveling told her of his first wife Bell refusing to divorce him was false. He had walked out many years before on Bell, who was more than willing to agree to a divorce. Aveling preferred to stay mar-

ried till she died, when he stood to inherit her estate. When Bell finally died in 1892, this amounted to £126 15s 4d, which Aveling invested in a residential property.

In March 1898 there was another shock. News reached Eleanor, no one seems quite certain how, that in the summer of the previous year Edward had secretly married a young actress named Eva Frye, using his professional stage name of Alec Nelson. He had been determined to keep this event

from Eleanor, knowing he was named in her will as sole executor and chief beneficiary. She altered the will, naming her sister Laura and her sister Jenny's children as the beneficiaries, in the days immediately before her death.

But could a further, slightly earlier discovery have been the one that tipped the balance? As Engels lay dying in 1895 it finally emerged that Freddy Demuth, assumed to be the son of a liaison between Engels and the Marx family housekeeper Helen

Demuth, was not Engels's illegitimate son but Karl Marx's own. Eleanor was the recorder of the life of her loved father. Had her death to do with her biographer's dilemma in accepting that this truth would forever be off limits, that the picture she was painting of her parents as "lifelong friends and lovers" who were "faithful till death" was necessarily a false one? Did she get out her white muslin in mourning of the fact that our serious endeavors are so often tinged with farce? □

# Rescuing Wonderful Shivery Tales

Marina Warner

## The Complete First Edition: The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm

by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm,  
translated from the German and  
edited by Jack Zipes, and  
illustrated by Andrea Dezsö.  
Princeton University Press,  
519 pp., \$35.00

## Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of the Grimms' Folk and Fairy Tales

by Jack Zipes.  
Princeton University Press,  
267 pp., \$35.00

## Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm

by Philip Pullman.  
Penguin, 421 pp., \$18.00 (paper)

## Selected Tales of the Brothers Grimm

translated from the German,  
selected, and with an afterword  
by Peter Wortsman.  
Archipelago, 238 pp., \$24.00 (paper)

## The Turnip Princess and Other Newly Discovered Fairy Tales

by Franz Xaver von Schönwerth,  
compiled, edited, and with  
a foreword by Erika Eichenseer,  
and translated from the German  
with an introduction and commentary  
by Maria Tatar.  
Penguin, 264 pp., \$17.00 (paper)

The Grimm brothers Wilhelm and Jacob were in their twenties and studying at the University of Marburg in the early 1800s when they were encouraged to collect German popular stories and other material by their law professor and mentor, Friedrich Carl von Savigny. Savigny was an important figure in the nationalist Romantic movement calling for Germany to be united politically and culturally; his friends and associates formed a tightly bonded, ardent group, caught up in the upheavals of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Their appeals for national recovery were combined with a quest for authentic voices of the *Volk*, the people.

The group included the writer and scholar Clemens Brentano (Savigny's brother-in-law) and the poet Achim von Arnim, who was married to another sister of Brentano's, Bettina, also a writer. Brentano and Arnim edited the influential songbook *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Boy's Magic Horn) in 1805–1808, with its eldritch ballads



'The Frog King'; illustration by Andrea Dezsö from The Complete First Edition:  
The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm

from the folk tradition, such as "The Erl King." The *Volk* could be heard, it was believed, in such songs, stories, lore, and language. The passion for *Poesie*, as the Grimms called the folkloric tradition, had already inspired in England an anthology of comparably terse, dark story-songs, Thomas Percy's 1765 *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. That same passion infuses the magical and nightmarish poems of Coleridge in *Lyrical Ballads* as well as Wordsworth's love of unlettered and unrecorded tradition:

*Will no one tell me what she sings?  
Perhaps the plaintive numbers  
flow*

*For old, unhappy far-off things,  
And battles long ago...*

The metaphors the Grimms used to describe their work are messianic and ecological: they believed they were saving authentic popular German culture, an endangered species. The preface to the first volume of the brothers' tales *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Children's and Household Tales), published in 1812, begins:

When a storm, or some other catastrophe sent from the heavens, levels an entire crop, we are relieved to find that a small patch, protected by tiny hedges or bushes,

has been spared and that some solitary stalks remain standing.

Of these few survivors, they wrote:

Ear upon ear will be carefully bound in bundles, inspected, and attended to as whole sheaths. Then they will be brought home and serve as the staple food for the entire winter. Perhaps they will be the only seed for the future.

This is how it seemed to us when we began examining the richness of German literature in earlier times.... The places by the stove, the hearth in the kitchen,...and above all the undisturbed imagination have been the hedges that have protected the tales....

The first volume was followed by another in 1815. Together these make up *The Complete First Edition* of the Grimms' tales, presented and fully translated into English for the first time by Jack Zipes. (He has left out the voluminous apparatus that the assiduous brothers added, which effectively presented the book not as fun for the family but as documents toward a national cultural memory.)

This collection contains many of the most-loved fairy tales in the history of the form: "Little Snow White" (*Sneewittchen*), with its haunting refrain ("Mirror, mirror...") and its three steps to deathly unconsciousness (first the stay-laces, then the poisoned comb, then the irresistible red red apple); the Grimms' chilling and ferocious variant of "Cinderella" in which her sisters cut off their toes and their heels to fit into the glass slipper; "Rapunzel"; "The Robber Bridegroom"; "Fitcher's Bird"—one could go on and on. The book is a classic, formed like a mosaic of precious small pieces, each one glinting with its own color and character, glassy and crystalline, but somehow hard, unyielding.

And yet much of it is unfamiliar. After the first edition was published, Wilhelm tinkered and tampered with the texts, trying to lighten the cruelty, patch over the sexual frankness (for example, the story of Rapunzel's pregnancy), smooth over non sequiturs, and pattern the dialogue to match the most memorable tales. The two brothers revised and added to their collections several times. While the first volume (1815)



includes fewer than seventy tales, by the Grimms' final and definitive edition in 1857, the total had grown to over two hundred, many quite different from the original form presented here.

The brothers' prose style diverges dramatically from that of earlier writers of fairy stories. These had tended to express feline licentiousness (Giam-battista Basile), sophisticated comic irony (Charles Perrault), and rococo deliriums (Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, who was the first writer to use the term *contes des fées*, in her book of that title in 1698). The Grimms' stories are spare and austere. When James Merrill wrote that he yearned for

the kind of unseasoned telling  
found  
In legends, fairy tales, a tone  
licked clean  
Over the centuries by mild old  
tongues,  
Grandam to cub, serene,  
anonymous,

he was referring to the Grimms, not to those older tellers of tales. Another recent translator of the Grimms, the English magical fabulist Philip Pullman, quotes Merrill approvingly, saying he was also aiming to capture this "tone licked clean."

Zipes likewise admires the Grimms' first collection for its extreme starkness and bleak matter-of-factness. He attributes this simplicity to its closeness to the storytellers and collectors who were the Grimms' original informants: "This," he writes,

is why the first edition of 1812/15  
is so appealing and unique: the  
unknown tales in this edition  
are formed by multiple and di-  
verse voices that speak to us more  
frankly than the tales of the so-  
called definitive 1857 edition.

(It so happens that Zipes has himself also produced a wonderfully useful, comprehensive volume of that "so-called definitive edition.")

Jack Zipes, born in 1937, studied at Dartmouth and Columbia and then in Munich and Tübingen, and has been Professor of German at the University of Minnesota since 1989. He has long been a staunch advocate of fairy tales and their proper study since his book *Breaking the Magic Spell* (1979) issued a devastating blast against the wishful thinking of mass entertainment and shook the staid and soporific scene of folklore studies. To interpret the tales he has combined Marxism, feminism, cultural materialism, and even—for a short period—evolutionary biology. He has stirred readers with a similar passion for his material, while attacking the use of literary fantasy in movies and television to camouflage moral manipulation. Writers whom he admires—Jane Yolen, Terri Windling, and above all Angela Carter—and the films informed by their work have supplied countermodels to the sins of the dream factory.

In the epilogue of the new critical collection, *Grimm Legacies*, Zipes, drawing on the work of the philosopher Ernst Bloch, once again argues that fairy tales are best understood as utopian thought experiments. When the peasant crushes the ogre, the poor lad finds justice; persecuted by malicious relatives, the kind sister gets her due, the courageous girl

saves her beloved siblings or lover. In an essay of 1930, "The Fairy Tale Moves on Its Own in Time," Bloch writes:

What is significant... is that it is reason itself that leads to the wish projections of the old fairy tales and serves them. Again what proves itself is a harmony with courage and cunning, as that earliest kind of enlightenment which already characterizes "Hansel and Gretel": consider yourself as born free and entitled to be totally happy, dare to make use of your power of reasoning, look upon the outcome of things as friendly. These are the genuine maxims of fairy tales, and fortunately for us they appear not only in the past but in the now.



Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, 1847; daguerreotype by Hermann Blow

Zipes is on a lifelong mission, as ardent as the Grimms', to bring fairy tales into circulation for the general increase of pleasure, mutual and ethical understanding, and everyone in the field, including myself, has been helped by him: his prodigious energy seems as inexhaustible as the fairy-tale purse that never empties.

He has also worked fervently as a translator across a wide swath of German, French, and Italian literature from the medieval tales to modernist experimental fiction. (He is the editor of the current Princeton series *Oddly Modern Fairy Tales*, which has brought out collections by Kurt Schwitters and Béla Balász—the author of the libretto for Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*.)

In 2002 a list of his works, drawn up in *Marvels & Tales* (the leading journal of fairy-tale studies), ran to seven pages. Since then, there have been dozens more publications, including the valuable encyclopedic survey of fairy tale films, *The Enchanted Screen*, as well as, most recently, the two books under review, in which his taste for polemic is undiminished, while his attention to historical setting and detail remain as productive as ever. In sum, Zipes has worked for over forty years to save the seed corn to which the Grimms likened their material, to guard its integrity and encourage its efflorescence.

The metaphors Zipes draws from nature and ecology can also help characterize the relations between oral, written, and dramatized folklore. The Grimms' story "The Singing, Springing Lark," about a young woman forced to marry a lion, can be seen as an ex-

ample of an endangered German species of "Beauty and the Beast," while Cocteau's film *La Belle et la Bête* (1946), a more refined version of that same story, is a rare hothouse orchid. You could say Zipes's oeuvre is a form of narrative husbandry.

What are the differences between the collections of 1812 and 1857? And, more importantly, do the differences in fact make a difference? After 1815, when the Grimms returned to their task, they left out as many as thirty-one stories, for various reasons. One was the grisly parable "How Some Children Played at Slaughtering," in which the children, after witnessing the butchering of a piglet, kill one of their little

friends. The brothers had come across it in a clipping in a newspaper edited by Heinrich von Kleist. This kind of cautionary horror story has the marks of urban myth, and shows how fairy stories were not the Brothers' prime interest. *Wundermärchen*, or wonder tales, only formed a part of their vastly ambitious monument to the German popular tradition.

They wrote in the "Circular Letter," distributed in 1815, that they planned to solicit materials from informants all over Germany. Jacob expressed interest in "folk songs and rhymes,... tales in prose that are told and known, in particular the numerous nursery and children's fairy tales... local legends... animal fables... funny tales about tricks played by rogues... old legal customs," and toward the end of the list, stories "about spirits, ghosts, witches, good and bad omens; phenomena and dreams." The first edition throws its nets widely, though not quite as widely as this; surprisingly, this rich array of story forms does not include "fairy tales" (*Feenmärchen*) although Zipes uses the word in his translation; there are elves, goblins, witches, and dwarves, but no fairies.

Wilhelm, who was on the whole a mild and gentle soul, wanted to keep the child murderers in the later editions, because he thought they contained a valuable warning not to confuse make-believe and reality. But the story roused furious protests from readers and was set aside as too savage. The brothers were also keen to purify their research by concentrating on Germanic ethnic origins, and some of their decisions

heightened the brusque callousness of the collection. The first edition includes "Puss in Boots" and "The Three Sisters." By taking out such tales because they were too French or Italian for a monument to the German *Volk*, a certain polish and grace was lost. Instead, the Grimms' collection presents a particular comic or savage hopefulness. Many of the stories end in revenge, rather than transformation or redemption. The evil queen in "Little Snow White," for example, must wear red-hot iron shoes at her stepdaughter's wedding, and dances herself to death. In later editions, Cinderella's ugly sisters' eyes are pecked out, whereas in Perrault, Cinderella lets bygones be bygones.

Other stories in the first edition were excluded because they were insufficiently oral in character, too scrappy, or too repetitive. The whittling could have gone on and on if the Grimms had applied their often inconsistent criteria more uniformly. They wanted the tales to come from known sources. Two dazzlingly well-turned tales—"The Juniper Tree" and "The Fisherman's Wife"—were sent to the brothers as written texts in the Pomeranian dialect by the Romantic visionary painter Philipp Otto Runge, who did not identify his informants. The Germans used them anyway.

The Grimms also acknowledged that the wonderful, shivery tale of "The Singing Bone" bears a resemblance to the famous Scots ballad "The Twa Sisters," also known as Binnorie/Minorie, which is still sung in many variations. (On YouTube you can hear Ewan MacColl and Emily Portman sing versions of it.) The plot of the ballad is essentially a ghost story about a sister who murders her younger sister over a man. In the Grimms' tale, rivalry between brothers over a princess drives the plot. But the central, haunting motif of the bone that denounces the murderer recurs in both stories: a passing shepherd sees it sticking out of the riverbank where the murderer has buried the body of his or her victim. In the Scots ballad, it's the breastbone—which the shepherd strings with the golden hair of the victim. In the Grimms', it's a femur or some such. He trims it for a mouthpiece for his pipe and then finds when he puts his lips to it that it sings of its own accord: "Dear shepherd, blowing on my bone... / My brothers killed me years ago!" In his own translation of the final 1857 edition, Zipes has a rendering that cries out with more urgency: "Oh, shepherd, shepherd, don't you know/ You're blowing on my bone!"

The translator and fiction writer Peter Wortsman places this story toward the start of the admirable Archipelago *Selected Tales of the Brothers Grimm* and follows it with "The Tale of the Juniper Tree," another story that contains that "playful—and therefore paradoxically comforting—terror" of the very best Grimms tales. In this tale, an evil woman kills her stepson so that her daughter, Marlenikin, will inherit the family's money. She then cooks the boy into a stew and serves him up to his father. When Marlenikin buries the boy's bones under a juniper tree, he reemerges as a beautiful bird who sings his misfortunes. Wortsman wants, he says, to keep "the sting and the bite of the original," but he likes to add a witty twirl as well:

My mother, she smote me,  
My father, he ate me,



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# Affordable ***New*** Digital Hearing Aid ***Outperforms*** Expensive Competitors Delivers ***Crystal - Clear*** Natural Sound

Reported by J. Page

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*My sister, sweet Marlenikin,  
Gathered all my little bonikins,  
Bound them in a silken scarf,  
And lay them under the  
juniper tree.  
Tweet, tweet, I'm a pretty birdie,  
look at me!*

Those “bonikins”! You can hear the translator’s dark glee under the bird’s warbling.

Comparing 1812 with 1857, the effect of Wilhelm’s revisions across the whole edition becomes clearer. Dortchen Wild, later Grimm after she married Wilhelm, was one of nine children of neighbors who were close family friends; she is the first source of “The Singing Bone,” but later the brothers amended it, with the possible help of another woman narrator, and Wilhelm both elaborated and trimmed the story, adding an opening “Once upon a time” and tying up loose ends, such as the confession of the evil sibling: “After the fate of the murdered man was revealed, the wicked brother could not deny the deed, and he was sewn up in a sack and drowned.”

This gruesome justice does not appear in the first edition. Such additions increase the dark mystery of the fairy tales; the characters are without depth but their blankness gives them something of the feel of a black hole into which the reader plunges. Pullman goes so far as to write, in his introduction to *Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm*, “one might almost say that [they] are not actually conscious.” Some of this weird emptiness has inspired a long tradition of using silhouettes to illustrate the tales, and Andrea Dezső’s graphic scissorings included in Zipes’s *Complete First Edition* pay tribute to the suggestive shadowplay of predecessors like Arthur Rackham and Lotte Reiniger (see illustration on page 65).

The Grimms made much of their quest for authentic, oral transmission, but in practice, as several scholars (Donald Haase and Maria Tatar, as well as Zipes) have pointed out, they broke their own rules frequently. The list of sources includes a host of highly literate and literary precursors and associates. Their dream of the uncontaminated peasant legacy became embodied in the contributions of Dorothea Viehmann, an innkeeper’s daughter, who passed on forty of the best stories. A fine engraving of her by Ludwig, the Grimms’ younger brother, appeared as the frontispiece of the 1819 edition of the Grimms’ tales. It became an icon of the wise crone, the symbol of a living archive and fount of ancient, pristine lore. The brothers had been strongly encouraged to make their scholarship a bit more family-friendly by including Ludwig’s illustrations after they learned of the huge success in England of the first English translation by Edgar Taylor (1823 and 1826), with its quirky, joyous drawings by George Cruikshank. In *Grimm Legacies*, Zipes relates how the tone of the English illustrations changed the tales’ reception, inspiring Dickens to write sentimentally about their innocence, and Ruskin to claim that Cruikshank’s “original etchings...[are] unrivalled in masterfulness of touch since Rembrandt.”

The picture-book was poised for glory in a niche market, the new child

readers of the professional classes, and the Grimms would inspire dazzling imaginative illustrators: besides Rackham and Reiniger, Walter Crane, John D. Batten, Henry Justice Ford, the enameled and sumptuous Edmund Dulac, and more recently Maurice Sendak and David Hockney helped imprint the Grimms’ words on generations; their images have transmitted the tales independently of Disney’s cartoons, another crucial medium. In the early years of the studio, when Walt himself was working, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) captured rather accurately the Grimms’ ambiguously mixed atmosphere of malice, dread, jollity, and mawkish sweetness. Wortsman’s *Selected Tales of the Brothers Grimm* steps out of the pictorial conventions altogether, juxtaposing richly colored, phantasmic, and voodoo-inspired paintings by various artists from Haiti with the well-known stories.

The transition from oral to written is not, however, clear cut, and the complexity of the process can be sensed in the complete first edition. The brothers’ task was more ideological than they could have known. What was and is German lore and story? As in the fields and hedgerow they invoked, seeds from elsewhere would blow in on the wind and take root and bloom; the horizons of fairy tale are vast, and likenesses appear at great distances from one another, mysteriously regardless of language, let alone political borders. In some sense you can invert the Grimms’ project and say that they were not saving an existing German corpus of story as much as brilliantly and successfully helping to establish it themselves as the foundation of a modern state and its identity—with consequences they could not have imagined and are not responsible for. The artist Anselm Kiefer, for example, born in March 1945, has entered the dark forest of fairy tale, grail legend, and national myths to track the tragic disfigurement of German Romanticism in modern times.

When Italo Calvino created his anthology *Fiabe italiane* (1956), Italy’s equivalent of the Grimms’ tales, he praised the oral storytellers’ liveliness, “realism,” and “imaginative language,” but he nevertheless took a crucial step and decided to rewrite the material. His approach runs counter to folklorists’ basic principle of fidelity to the source, but it reveals the central difficulty the Grimms encountered, that on the page oral versions can fade and falter. Performance adds vital elements: the speaker literally breathes life into the words. Wilhelm kept fiddling with the texts because he rightly sensed something was missing; Calvino turned his own luminous gifts for literary narration to the foundational voices of his country because he felt that it was necessary.

Folktales and fairy tales are literature from the era before silent reading; for most of us the Grimms’ tales no longer rely on print to be told and retold but after over two hundred years, the abrupt, sharp tales the brothers published have become richly patined with memories of such performances—musical versions, films, television series... as well as parents’ and schoolteachers’ readings.

In 2009 the news that around five hundred fairy tales, collected by the nineteenth-century ethnographer Franz

Xaver von Schönwerth, had been found in the Regensburg municipal library in Germany created headlines. The Grimms have achieved one of their ambitions: nobody casually exterminates fairy tales. The scholar Erika Eichenseer sifted and transcribed and published them in German as *Prinz Roszwüfl* (Prince Dung Beetle); in English they have now appeared under the less rebarbative title *The Turnip Princess*. The eminent Harvard professor of comparative literature Maria Tatar acts as the presiding good fairy at this christening, and lively and lucid as ever, has translated, introduced, and annotated around seventy stories, making for an anthology comparable in size to the Grimms’ first edition.

An enthusiastic folklorist working in Bavaria, Schönwerth, a contemporary of the Grimms, saw his task in the same terms as the brothers: to rescue local storytelling from extinction. Jacob Grimm knew of his work and praised it highly (“No one in Germany has gathered tales so thoughtfully and thoroughly and with such finesse”), yet strangely Schönwerth does not appear among their contributors, and Zipes is also silent on the subject. Schönwerth’s collection has some of the same stories as the Grimms (e.g., “Seven with One Blow”) and shares many motifs and characters—with variations. There are also migrants and blow-ins from the Arabian Nights (“The Beautiful Slave Girl”). But it presents interesting differences because, above all, as Tatar points out, his Cinderellas, tricksters, and even blond beauties are male. Typical is the tale called “Lousehead” about a poor boy shunned because he always wears a cap:

“Which one of you wants to marry Lousehead?” The two eldest [sisters] remained silent, but the youngest smiled, gave him her hand, and then took off his cap. Everyone could now see that he had golden locks rather than an itchy scalp.

Lice turn up in the Grimms’ tales, too, in “The Three Golden Hairs,” for instance, but Schönwerth’s dramatic personae exist even more closely to the poverty line, in harsh urban conditions and on unforgiving farm land, rather than on the edge of wild forests; the prose is blunt, the dynamics plain and simple; “cunning and high spirits,” the fairy-tale motives that Benjamin admired, win out again and again; vengeance is absolute. Metamorphoses take place—into toads, snakes, calves, cows, weasels; magic is a means to a worldly end. The turnip princess of the title story has a magic instrument—a rusty nail; hazel nuts rather than roses feature in a tale called “Ashfeathers,” which combines elements of “Beauty and the Beast” and “Cinderella.”

In one of the most intriguing stories, “The Enchanted Quill,” the feather from a (female) crow turns into a pen: “If you use it to write down a wish,” the crow tells the heroine, “the wish will come true.” She first asks for “the very finest dishes” and plays gleeful tricks on unwanted suitors. Here the transition from the sung charm to the inscribed spell has become embodied in an active and magic pen. Yet a silent reader of Schönwerth’s tales still feels the need for performance, to blow this horn, to breathe some warmth into these bones and make them sing. □



# Comic, Ironic, Grieving

Dan Chiasson

**Collected Poems**  
by Mark Strand.  
Knopf, 520 pp., \$30.00

## 1.

Mark Strand died in November, at the age of eighty, leaving behind his newly published *Collected Poems*. This seems a bad deal: a man in exchange for a book. But Strand had long explored the feeling of having somehow disappeared into his art, which returned to him a version of himself, much altered

*world as you know it.”  
How like him, everyone thought.  
Then he was gone,  
And the world was a blank. It was  
cold and the air was still.  
Tell me, you people out there,  
what is poetry anyway?  
Can anyone die  
without even a little?*

The “great poet” confounds by paradox, timing his disappearances so as to create, in his fans, maximum emotional ruin. The rest of us are left in the “cold,” “blank,” and “still” aftermath,

*love the twenty-first century  
more,  
For in it I see someone in bath-  
robe and slippers, brown-eyed  
and poor,  
Walking through snow without  
leaving so much as a footprint  
behind.”*

*“Oh,” I said, put-  
ting my hat on, “oh.”*

The poem was published in 1998, just in time for the century’s end. Even our prognostications for the future will someday be seen as features—symp-

time but as a measure of it. The result, in these late poems, is often a blunt poetry of inventoried losses, fixated on the past even as it vanishes into the past:

*Time slips by; our sorrows do not  
turn into poems,  
And what is invisible stays that  
way. Desire has fled,*

*Leaving only a trace of perfume  
in its wake,  
And so many people we loved  
have gone,*

*And no voice comes from outer  
space, from the folds  
Of dust and carpets of wind to tell  
us that this*

*Is the way it was meant to happen,  
that if only we knew  
How long the ruins would last we  
would never complain.*

Strand learned from Stevens—whose austere late couplets inform these lines—the trick of bringing his wishes into being by negation: those fraying “nos” and “nots.” But Stevens held on to the idea of poetry as a plausible compensation for loss. The flatness of these lines seems to rule out even poetry, perhaps even these lines of poetry. And the disappointment is real: Who doesn’t hope that the papers will someday bring us the news of a “voice... from outer space”? Strand died after the disappearance of God but before the arrival of a suitable replacement.

## 2.

Reading the *Collected Poems*, you realize what a personal writer, what an intimate writer, Strand was all along. He came into his own with his second book, *Reasons for Moving* (1968). Both the title poem and “Eating Poetry” are anthology pieces, the kinds of poems that turn up reliably on subway ads for National Poetry Month. These poems (along with others of the era) gave birth to the modern “prompt,” that mainstay of Creative Writing programs and classes. Their opening lines set the imaginative parameters. The poems, a little too predictably, then one-up themselves, line after line:

*Ink runs from the corners of my  
mouth.  
There is no happiness like mine.  
I have been eating poetry.*

*The librarian does not believe  
what she sees.  
Her eyes are sad  
and she walks with her hands in  
her dress.*

The poem goes on for eighteen lines in more or less this way, a series of comic escalations of the absurdist premise. Billy Collins—whose own poems have launched a thousand writing exercises—is the contemporary heir to this kind of thing, leap-frogging his own jokes to get to later jokes. Such poems tend to be made of discreet statements, so as to allow for laughter and applause between lines. It is hard to build



Mark Strand, Joseph Brodsky, Adam Zagajewski, and Derek Walcott in Brodsky’s garden, New York City, 1986; photograph by Jill Kremenitz

in the process. The poems hold their author at some distance, with feelings of amusement and pity; all along those poems suspected their author to be just a ghost moving warily through them. We knew what life without Strand might be like: the poems regarded him posthumously, as though already dwelling in the life without him their maker had arranged. The poems are cautious about large claims, but there is a boast at their core: they always figured they would outlive him.

They have, and they will. The greatest work is the newest, from *Blizzard of One* to *Almost Invisible*; like Wallace Stevens, his master, Strand seemed to function best when the situation was pared to its elementals. Old age made the intelligence in his poetry seem to float almost independent of its author. The late poems taught us how to view as evanescent Strand’s worldliness, his elegance, his enviable looks, even his fame, which grew out of the very poems that ironized it. In “The Great Poet Returns,” a “limousine with all-white tires and stained-glass windows” delivers the Christ-like “great one” to an adoring crowd:

*“No need to rush,” he said at the  
close of the reading, “the end  
Of the world is only the end of the*

certain that the answer to that concluding question is “Most certainly. Yes.”

It is surprising that a poetry so skeptical of poetry’s prestige would move us, but it does. Many of the late poems end in the key of abruptness and confusion, embodying the void they describe. Here is “I Will Love the Twenty-First Century” in its entirety:

*Dinner was getting cold. The  
guests, hoping for quick,  
Impersonal, random encounters  
of the usual sort, were sprawled  
In the bedrooms. The potatoes  
were hard, the beans soft, the  
meat—  
There was no meat. The winter  
sun had turned the elms and  
houses yellow;  
Deer were moving down the road  
like refugees; and in the drive-  
way, cats  
Were warming themselves on  
the hood of a car. Then a man  
turned  
And said to me: “Although I love  
the past, the dark of it,  
The weight of it teaching us noth-  
ing, the loss of it, the all  
Of it asking for nothing, I will*

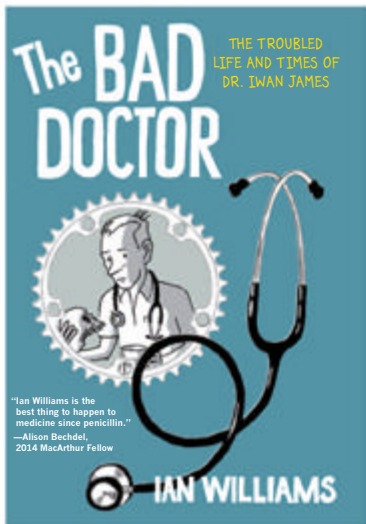
toms—of the past: by far the majority of this poem’s readers will evaluate its prophecies, like those in Thomas Hardy’s turn-of-the-twentieth century poem “A Darkling Thrush,” after the fact. The weightless, wandering, “poor” man in “bathrobe and slippers” is a cipher for old age. Time will fill in the details.

A poet’s audience is chronological; his readership (those “people out there”) is cumulative across the entirety of the future. It is impossible to know what the future will think of him. Poetry is not a TED Talk, with its audience, summoned all at once and all in one place, verifiably large and spellbound. Strand’s work has a special stake in anticipated recollection, imagining itself to be the kind of experience “whose appearance would be its vanishing.” Poems synchronize arrival and departure, noting the imperceptible process by which “the architecture of our time/Is becoming the architecture of the future.” That’s a brilliant paradox, implying that “our” architecture both will be replaced by and will become “the future,” joining what T.S. Eliot, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” called “the simultaneous order” of past masterworks.

Strand takes no comfort, none, in abstraction; his work proposes its own elegance not as a stay against passing

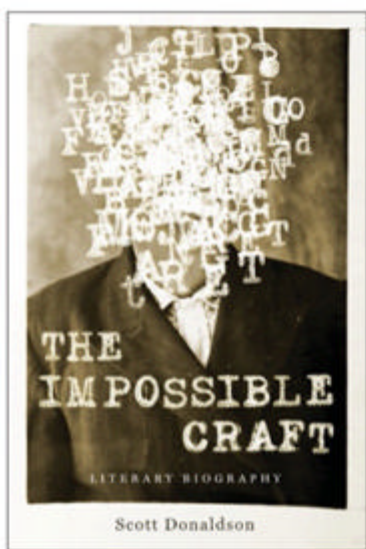
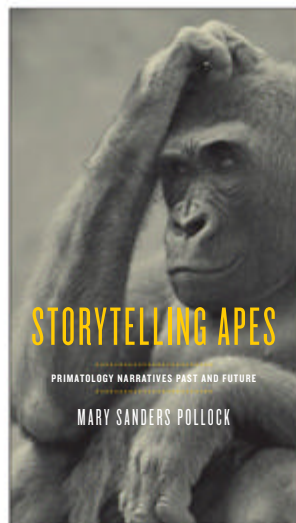


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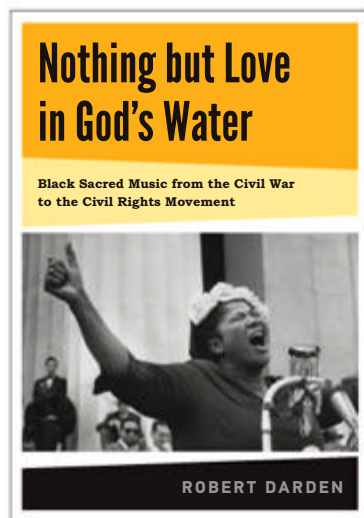
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anything very complex if every few lines you deliver a punch line.

The slickness of the early work, profigate in its dedications to fellow writers, suggests, to me, the era when the dinosaurs had died off and a new, very attractive crop of poets, less damaged than their forebears, encountered one another at conferences, panels, and retreats, for a weekend or a month at a time. One pictures porches, tea, mosquitoes, and awards. It is hard to read these poems, especially those collected in *Darker* (1970), Strand's third book, without considering the precise social usefulness of their accounts of solitude and despair. The poems may well outlast Breadloaf and Iowa City, but for me it is too early to see them as much more than a species—a very dour species—of charm.

I suspect the popularity of these poems, the effectiveness with which they greased their author's passage from podium to podium to podium, wore on Strand, because the work after the early 1970s deepens in sudden and unexpected ways. *The Story of Our Lives* (1973), Strand's fourth book, begins with an "Elegy for My Father," a poem that right away changed the course of Strand's career. The reader is now alone with a voice freed from the existential one-offs and surrealist zingers. "Elegy" is a long poem in numbered and titled parts, suggesting, perhaps, the stages of mourning or the stations of the cross. These are the opening lines of the first section, "The Empty Body":

*The hands were yours, the arms  
were yours,  
But you were not there.  
The eyes were yours, but they  
were closed and would not  
open.  
The distant sun was there.  
The moon poised on the hill's  
white shoulder was there.  
The wind on Bedford Basin was  
there.  
The pale green light of winter was  
there.  
Your mouth was there,  
But you were not there.*

This is the new tone of abundance tallied in light of deprivation: Strand's way of looking for his father requires him to catalog all the usual places where he could be found, chiefly the body, now newly alien. A later section gives us the father's biography in capsule form:

*You have your shadow.  
The places where you were have  
given it back.  
The hallways and bare lawns of  
the orphanage have given it  
back.  
The Newsboy's Home has given  
it back.  
The streets of New York have  
given it back and so have the  
streets of Montreal.*

All the "places where you were"—Belém, Manaus, Rio, Mexico City, Halifax—enter the poem in this way, returning "your shadow" as though the only impress made upon the world isn't an impress at all. "Nothing could stop you" from dying, Strand writes: "Not your son who thought you would live forever." "Elegy for My Father"—its title listless, intentionally devoid of inven-

tion—preserves from early poems like "My Life" Strand's comic sense of himself as so passive he might as well be inanimate. In those poems, Strand suggested that life is a process of gradual subtraction from the sum of one's years, perceptions, gifts, and experiences, which are all granted at birth and, one by one, removed.

"I grow into my death," he wrote: "My life is small/and getting smaller. The world is green./Nothing is all." This comic conceit would tend to darken over time, as it comes to seem less fanciful, more literal. Many grim poems, each grimmer than the last, would seem likely to follow. The silence after death—the final subtraction—would then seem the ultimate accomplishment. But Strand found a language that preserved his comic sense of life's ironies while grieving for death and change. The late work is more sensuous and worldly to the extent that living in the world heightens our feeling of isolation. Strand followed Gerard Manley Hopkins in seeing his "selfbeing" as irreducibly weird, and stranger the closer it felt. Hopkins felt especially isolated when he thought about how real he seemed to himself:

When I consider my selfbeing; my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of *I* and *me* above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutleaf or camphor, and is incommunicable by any means to another man . . . nothing else in nature comes near this unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness, and selving, this selfbeing of my own.

Late poems like "The Delirium Waltz" and Strand's contemplation of the final words of Christ, "Poem After the Last Seven Words," honor the "distinctiveness" of individual experience as well as its arbitrariness, the suspicion that individuality is a standard feature of all lives.

Donne had the portrait he commissioned of himself in a burial shroud, which he contemplated in his final days. Strand's late poems are self-portraits of a very different kind, but they serve the same purpose. Here is "Old Man Leaves Party" in its entirety:

*It was clear when I left the party  
That though I was over eighty  
I still had  
A beautiful body. The moon  
shone down as it will  
On moments of deep introspec-  
tion. The wind held its breath.  
And look, somebody left a mirror  
leaning against a tree.  
Making sure that I was alone,  
I took off my shirt.  
The flowers of bear grass nodded  
their moon-washed heads.  
I took off my pants and the mag-  
pies circled the redwoods.  
Down in the valley the creaking  
river was flowing once more.  
How strange that I should stand  
in the wilds alone with my body.  
I know what you are thinking.  
I was like you once. But now  
With so much before me, so many  
emerald trees, and  
Weed-whitened fields, mountains  
and lakes, how could I not  
Be only myself, this dream of  
flesh, from moment to moment?*



# Highly Magical History

Rachel Polonsky

## Before and During

by Vladimir Sharov,  
translated from the Russian  
by Oliver Ready.  
Dedalus, 348 pp., \$19.99 (paper)

In the bloody summer of 2014 Vladimir Sharov's eighth novel, *Return to Egypt*, was shortlisted for "The Big Book," Russia's most prestigious literary award (and the world's most remunerative after the Nobel Prize for Literature).<sup>1</sup> It won the Russian Booker Prize several months later. Its hero, a Soviet agronomist descended from Nikolai Gogol, takes upon himself the task of completing his ancestor's unfinished masterpiece, *Dead Souls*, and leading the Russian people to salvation.

In September, Sharov gave a long interview to *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, the Russian government's newspaper of record. "Your main themes, from book to book, are God, History, Motherland, art," the interviewer commented. Lamenting the lack of escape these days from politics, she quoted a passage from *Return to Egypt* describing Gogol's birthplace:

Ukraine, a former borderland for Poland and for Russia, was born of their mixing and their hatred. That riot of unclean forces that you find in Gogol comes from his belief that there is no place on earth better or freer for unclean forces than here.

Sharov expressed horror at any connection of these words with the daily news: "I would never have wanted to be a prophet of anything like this." The conflict in Ukraine will take decades to resolve, he predicted: "In history wounds heal very slowly."

Sharov's fiction is a search for the seeds of history. He is a historian by training; his graduate dissertation was on the "Time of Troubles," the Russian political crisis of the early seventeenth century. He bears the wounds of Soviet history:

I, like others, was never able to forgive Soviet power many and varied things, among which were the millions of people who were shot or perished in the camps, including two thirds of my own family.<sup>2</sup>

Their number included his paternal grandparents, Israel and Faina Nyurenberg, members of the socialist Bund from Ukraine. Faina's name appears on an execution list sent to Stalin by Nikolai Yezhov, head of the NKVD, the secret police, in July 1938. Sharov's father, Sher Nyurenberg, who was born in Kiev, specialized in genetics at Moscow State University. In the 1920s, he became a popular science writer, changing his name in 1937 to Aleksandr Sharov (a common Russian

name with no Jewish trace). In that year of mass purges, he joined one of the heroic scientific expeditions of the Stalin era, a winter flight across the Arctic. Vladimir, his only child, was born in 1952. In the late 1950s, Aleksandr Sharov turned to writing magical tales and science fiction for children. "My father was a child until the end of his days," Sharov remembers. He regards the childlike brightness of his father's way of seeing—his naiveté, fantasy, and acuteness of perception—as necessary conditions for the writing of genuine magical tales, and integral to a tragic view of life.<sup>3</sup>



A fashion shoot on a dismantled statue of Stalin, Budapest, 1990

The genre in which Vladimir Sharov writes has been called "magical historicism." The cultural historian Alexander Etkind groups him with Victor Pelevin, Vladimir Sorokin, and Dmitry Bykov as "fashionable post-Soviet authors" of fantastical fiction, who combine religion and history in "rich and shocking ways." Russian magical historicism, unlike magic realism, grapples with history rather than social issues or psychology. The context is a "postcatastrophic" contemporary Russia in which "there is no consensus on the crucial issues of historical memory."<sup>4</sup> All these writers are now published by mainstream publishers, win literary prizes, enjoy media coverage, and have created public sensations. Though Sharov has quietly gained critical prestige in Russia, he is the only one of the four who has remained unknown to English readers.

*Before and During*, the first of Sharov's works to be translated into English, was his third novel. He wrote it as communism was falling apart between 1988 and 1991, and calls it the last novel of the Soviet era. It was published two years later in *Novyi mir*, the respected literary journal for which his father had

written. The novel caused a distressing scandal. An effigy of Sharov was burned near his home. A rift opened in *Novyi mir*'s editorial board. Two board members, literary critics Sergei Kostyrko and Irina Rodnyanskaya, dissented from the decision to publish the work, which, they felt, had sullied the journal's pages. Their article, "Trash from the Hut" (airing dirty linen in public), is a miniature testament to the febrile cultural insecurity of the early 1990s, when the Soviet empire had run aground in the wreckage of the twentieth century's ideological experiments, and the popular culture of the West deluged Russian media.

Lamenting the general spiritual confusion and loss of aesthetic consensus, Rodnyanskaya called Sharov's treatment of "Russian and sacred history" a "rape." His intention, she concluded, was to make fools of his readers. Kostyrko accused Sharov of dragging Russian high culture—as well as the "legends of Christ, the secrets of the Stalin regime and the mysteries of the Jewish mentality"—into the realm of contemporary kitsch: the realm, as he put it, of Arnold Schwarzenegger, soft porn movies like *Emanuelle*, and Anatoly Kashpirovsky, the psychic healer who, as the USSR disintegrated, gazed hypnotically at a dazed population from TV screens, promising to repair domestic appliances and broken lives with extrasensory powers.

Two decades later, *Before and During* remains a disorienting read. The novel invokes real historical events and people (Tolstoy, Madame de Staël, Saint John of Kronstadt, Alexander Scriabin, and Stalin, among others), swirling them into a phantasmagoric alternative chronology. Stories germinate within other stories, unfolding in astonishing variations. The clarity and directness of Sharov's prose—wonderfully rendered by Oliver Ready—are disconcerting, almost hallucinatory. His writing is at times funny, at times so piercingly moving, so brimful of unassuaged sorrow, that it causes a double-take. "How did I get here?" is a question his reader will likely ask again and again.

Alyosha, the first of the novel's storytellers, starts out lost on an "uneven, uncertain path," in an urban wasteland outside Moscow, trying to find his way

to a psychiatric hospital. Three years earlier, he slipped on ice and hit his head. He has suffered repeated blackouts and been lost for weeks in vagrancy. The danger to his life and the terrifying prospect of complete amnesia have brought him to the Korsakov Hospital to seek treatment from an enigmatic Dr. Kronfeld. Alyosha knows that his own thoughts are "strange." The stories he will hear in hospital are stranger still. They are told by his fellow inmates, who, Kronfeld informs him, are mostly Old Bolsheviks and former Party bosses. Though demented, incontinent, and unaware of their own condition, they are still dedicated to habits of intellectual inquiry, and all long to confess and seek redemption.

The year is 1965. Alyosha is in mid-life, a "seasoned" writer. His university dissertation was on Madame de Staël. Though he once planned a popular biography of her for a series called *Lives of Remarkable People*, he has made a living writing children's books about Lenin. The Bolsheviks of his imagination are as vanilla-sweet and comforting as confectionary, conjured out of childhood sense memories. As a boy, Alyosha had lived across the street from a cake factory called "Bolshevik," which gave off delicious smells. He cherishes a beautiful image of his mother's slender fingers, tipped with violet nail varnish, reaching into boxes of chocolates made in another factory called "Bolshevik Girl." So all the Bolsheviks in his books ("my Bolsheviks"), both male and female, end up "like mummy, kind, tender mummy."

In Alyosha's injured mind, the play of memory and forgetting becomes obsessional. Memory is "the centre of [his] world," an obligation so heavy he cracks under its weight. He decides that he can do without his own, but that he has a duty to preserve the memory of others: "Those whom only I had known or, at any rate, whom only I was prepared to remember." He takes an idea from the life of Tsar Ivan the Terrible. As he learned from his father, Ivan compiled a Memorial Book of the Disgraced at the end of his life, recording the victims of his terror so that prayers might be said for their resurrection. Alyosha sets out to write his own Memorial Book, which will conform to "that Old Russian genre, the Lament":

A lament for people I knew and loved. For people who, sad to say, died before their time, leaving nothing behind except in my memory.... Not one of their lives fell into place; in none of them was there much love, joy or, at times, even meaning; and not one of these people accomplished much while they still could.... They went through agony before dying and departed in sorrow. Dying, they felt hard done by, disgraced, cheated.

The first two names in the Memorial Book are Nikolai Pastukhov, a former public prosecutor caught in a love triangle, whom Alyosha met by chance on a train, and Vera Rozhdestvenskaya, a distant relative who, though now senile, is his last tie with the relatives from whom he was cut off by his father's

<sup>1</sup>The prize was announced in Moscow on November 25, 2014. Sharov's *Return to Egypt* won third place after Zakhar Prilepin's *The Dwelling* and Vladimir Sorokin's *Telluriya*.

<sup>2</sup>Vladimir Sharov, *The Temptation of Revolution: Essays* (Moscow: Arsis, 2009), p. 58 (in Russian).

<sup>3</sup>Vladimir Sharov, "When Shera was on Form: The Story of my Father," *Znamia*, No. 10 (2009, in Russian).

<sup>4</sup>Alexander Etkind, "Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction," *Slavic Review*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (Fall 2009).



death. Rozhdestvenskaya's husband, who once ran oilfields in Chechnya, was arrested in 1937 and shot. Her life since has been "hard and terrifying." In the undignified muddle of her dementia she retrieves a few "sharp, detailed and above all joyful" fragments: "Her first pair of dancing shoes, the dacha..., the boycott of German shops in 1914 and the thoroughbred collie she was given not long before the war."

Pastukhov and Rozhdestvenskaya have each sought to create some remembrance of themselves in writing. Yet though his Memorial Book gives Alyosha a sense that he has "been granted the gift of resurrection," his attempt to bring people back with words underlines the impossibility of creating a true record of the past. What is not written down drifts away and dies; what is written down is falsified by memory, and much of what happens is too "dreadful and unforgivable" to be remembered at all. So what becomes of love, he wonders? And what becomes of ideas, beliefs, and prayers, and the yearning for collective salvation that runs through Russian history in a current of sacrificial blood?

"The third person I'm going to write about is Tolstoy," Alyosha announces in a sudden divagation from his promised lament for unremarkable lives. Other inmates enter the scene: Morozov and Saburov, disciples of Tolstoy who once lived in a Siberian commune, and "many other people" who discuss at length the rival interpretations of Tolstoyanism. Were the great writer's ethical principles so pure that they

could not be put to bad use? Or was his ideology "an act of violence against ordinary human nature," almost identical with Bolshevism in its desire to remake people and build paradise on earth? Could Tolstoyanism indeed have been an inspiration for the cruellest investigators of Stalin's NKVD?

Alyosha's account of this debate is intercut with childhood memories of a neighbor, Semyon Kochin, a survivor of Stalin's camps, expert in Tolstoy's life and thought, "who in 1936 passed through the hands of just such an investigator in Moscow's Lefortovo Prison." Kochin, a wise and eccentric recluse (who also seeks to prolong his life through writing), becomes the fourth subject of Alyosha's Memorial Book. "In general," Kochin says in a grave paradox, "those who feel the imperfections of this world most keenly are disinclined to set much store by the lives of others." Tolstoy was torn between his beliefs and the bonds of family love. He was "a very good man," Kochin would say, but his renunciation of his wife and children in favor of a set of ideas was evil.

Sharov has said gnomically in interviews that all Russian history is a commentary on the Book of Genesis. Questions of origin and identity preoccupy his hero Alyosha. "There wasn't... anyone to tell me who I was or where I'd come from," he laments when thinking of his own family. The "vital childish question," he says of the Bolsheviks, is "where they came from and how they were born." An intricately looping thread of fantastical incestuous genealogies winds through *Before and During*. The first of these is in the

Tolstoy family, whose doctor, Alyosha says straightforwardly, confirmed that Tolstoy's eldest son Lev was, in fact, the writer's monoovular twin, whose development was delayed, and who mysteriously matured in the womb of his wife Sonia.

In search of an explanation of the hospital's origins and the other patients' identities, Alyosha seeks out another inmate, Nikolai Ifraimov. Ifraimov, a kind of Jewish mystic and sage, tells him that between 1922 and 1932 the hospital had been a top-secret Institute for Natural Genius, "signed into existence by Lenin." Its director, the "charming and exceptionally clever" Professor Trogau, studied genius and its proximity to mental pathology. The institute's purpose was to increase the genius of the country, bringing it closer to the fulfillment of its sacred mission: human redemption. In 1932, however, Trogau was purged and his institute disbanded. (Later, we learn why.) Ten of the present inmates, including Ifraimov, are the last of its alumni.

Ifraimov's nightly storytelling is intercut with Alyosha's accounts of his own mental state, and the intellectual discussions and orgiastic sexual activities of the other inmates. He begins another Memorial Book to record their lives, "to make them loved." They stand in line to empty out "whole sackfuls of life... numberless trifles of lived experience." In writing, Alyosha again finds saving purpose. He comes to realize that Ifraimov, too, is dictating a text for the Memorial Book. The "essence" of events "so often, is obscured," says Ifraimov. He recounts an alternative, fantastical history of the Russian Revolution, unearthing its buried philosophical seeds and its "ultimate aim": "The return—by the efforts of man, not God—of all humankind to heaven." Finally, the narratives converge in a snowy reprise of the Flood in Genesis, with the hospital ward as the Ark of Salvation.

At the center of Ifraimov's story are Madame de Staël and the influential nineteenth-century philosopher (and librarian of Moscow's Rumyantsev Museum) Nikolai Fyodorov. Fyodorov, who in reality died in 1903, developed the idea that humanity's "common task" was the material resurrection of the dead. Alyosha learns that the elderly couple on his ward—"the elegant, straight-backed old lady in the next room... and the old man in love with her"—are de Staël and Fyodorov. In the final sequence, Fyodorov becomes Noah. Though the historical de Staël died in 1817 (she visited Russia in 1812), Ifraimov's de Staël has used kabbalistic magic to give birth to herself three times, becoming a provincial Russian landowner, "Evgeniya Frantsevna Stal," mistress of the virginal Fyodorov (in a creepy fairy-tale erotic adventure involving opium stupors and a crystal coffin), and mother of his three brain-damaged soldier sons (who are also on the ward).

De Staël recognizes Fyodorov as "the source of the coming revolution, its true root." He sucks out of her all she knew about the French Revolution, adapting it for Russia, which, for centuries, has believed itself chosen among nations. Fyodorov wants life on earth to be made perfect. He is in revolt against

the world's complexity, and he dreams of simplifying it through destruction. This is, in essence, a revolt against God, Ifraimov explains, for "the world of God is the world of questions. Only questions are commensurable with the complexity of his world."

The self-reborn de Staël has an astounding talent for love (and for negligent procreation). The "trail of her ideas... stretches far and wide." Her affair with a noble Georgian begets a son, Stalin ("son of Stal"), who later becomes her lover in a history-shaping on-off affair. In her Moscow mansion, she nurtures revolution: fund-raising, organizing, and sleeping with socialists. The most ardent revolutionaries are not Leninists but Fyodorovists, delirious with Russian messianism. After 1917, de Staël assumes "a fairly elevated position in the communist hierarchy" and founds the Institute for Natural Genius with Professor Trogau. She shapes the Stalin cult, aborts Trotsky's baby, and provokes the purge of the Old Bolsheviks by seducing them one by one to provoke Stalin's jealousy. If he really wants to build communism, she urges as they walk among the "bugs and butterflies" in his dacha garden, he must "kill and kill," for communism can only "be formed by perfect people."

De Staël's most ecstatic moments of physical passion are with the composer Scriabin, "the most brilliant of all the revolutionaries to have crossed her path." They lunch together almost every day at Moscow's Metropol Hotel as he works on his revolutionary *Mysterium*, a synesthetic musical composition that will enact "the Universe in ruins" and "provoke global catastrophe." We learn that the "unofficial" history of 1917, based on "highly unusual sources," for which Trogau was purged, was a decoding of Lenin's *The State and Revolution*. The famous treatise is in fact part of Scriabin's lost *Mysterium*, encrypted by an obedient Lenin in 1914. In his Memorial Book, Alyosha copies out "Trogau's transcript of Lenin's shorthand," a twenty-page stream of visionary historical writing, in which revolution, war, and terror are evoked through smell. On the shores of Lake Geneva, Scriabin—John the Baptist to Lenin's Messiah—preaches "world war, carnage, the death of the old world, revolution, socialism, the last days."

Sharov's sense of revolutionary history comes from the Soviet writer Andrei Platonov. In a recent essay he calls Platonov "one of the few, who saw and knew the revolution from within" in all its childlike enthusiasm, for whom the connection between Communist revolution and Orthodox Christian eschatology was obvious. Controversially, in today's Russia, Sharov sees the idea of Muscovy as the Third Rome—set down by the Monk Filofei in 1510 and carried into the twentieth century by Fyodorov—as a potent seed of 1917. Russia's sense of divine election and its mission to spread the faith led to a meek acceptance of terror, when "one part of a nation leads another to slaughter," as a necessary cleansing, the price of deliverance.

Sharov deserves a readership outside Russia. His novels convey a singular vision of history in all its baffling strangeness. While the metaphorical density of his fantasies may be perplexing, Sharov's luminous prose never loses the



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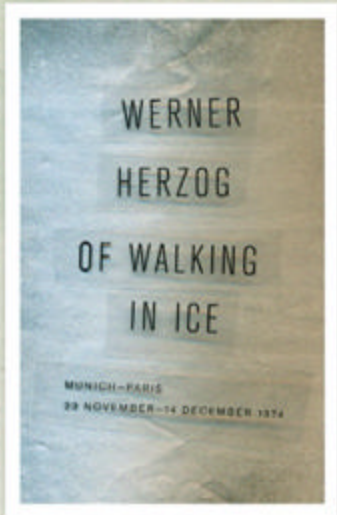
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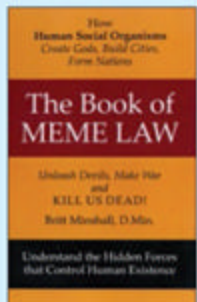
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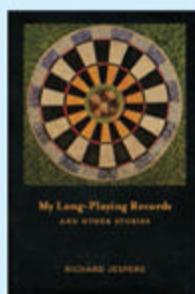
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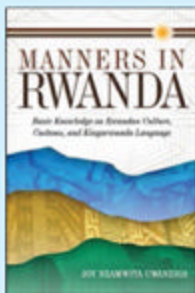
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enchantment and warmth of traditional magical tales, or their sense of hidden menace. In the face of overwhelming individual and collective loss, he has turned fiction into a style of mourning and an instrument of authentic historical discovery.

Sharov's forgotten Fyodorovist-Bolsheviks bring to mind Stalin's henchman, Vyacheslav Molotov. He joined the Bolsheviks in 1906 and died in 1986, not long before Sharov began writing *Before and During*. In old age, he spent his days in Moscow's Lenin

Library (the former Rumyantsev Museum), writing unwanted memoranda for the Communist Party Central Committee. He still affirmed the "special mission" of the Russian people. When asked why terror had been necessary, he replied, "We do not have

ready-made pure people, purged of all sins."<sup>5</sup> □

<sup>5</sup>Molotov *Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics—Conversations with Felix Chuev*, edited by Albert Resis (Ivan R. Dee, 1993), pp. 63 and 255.

# Inside the Islamic State

Malise Ruthven

**Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate**  
by Abdel Bari Atwan.  
London: Saqi, 256 pp., £16.99  
(to be published by University  
of California Press in September)

In November 2001, two months after the al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, James Buchan, a novelist and a former Middle East correspondent, published an article in the London *Guardian* in which he imagined the triumphant entry into Mecca of Osama bin Laden, the world's most wanted terrorist:

It was no ordinary evening, but possibly the holiest in the holiest month of Islam, the so-called Lailat al-Qadr, or the Night of Power, on which, according to the Koran, God's revelation was sent down to the Prophet Mohammed... More than 50,000 people had gathered on the hot pavement of the mosque enclosure and in the streets outside to pass the evening in prayer. Millions of others were watching on a live television broadcast at home.

As Sheikh Abdul Rahman, famous all over the Islamic world for the beauty of his voice, mounted the pulpit, a hand reached up and tugged at his robe. There was a commotion, and in the place of the Imam stood a tall man, unarmed and dressed in the white cloth of the pilgrim... and recognisable from a million television screens: Osama bin Laden, flanked by his lieutenants...

Armed young men appeared from the crowd and could be seen padlocking the gates, and taking up firing positions in the galleries.

So began the insurrection that was to overturn the kingdom of Saudi Arabia...

While the details in Buchan's fantasy describing "the west's worst nightmare" have changed, the scenario he outlined appears more plausible today than it did fourteen years ago. Bin Laden is dead, thanks to the action of US Navy SEALs in May 2011, but as Abdel Bari Atwan explains in *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's official successor as leader of "al-Qa'ida central," looks increasingly irrelevant. Bin Laden's true successor is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the shadowy caliph of ISIS, the so-called Islamic State. As "Commander of the Faithful" in that nascent state he poses a far more formidable threat to the West and to Middle Eastern regimes—including the Saudi kingdom—that are sustained by Western arms than bin Laden did from his Afghan cave or hideout in Pakistan.



ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi preaching in a mosque in Mosul, from a video released in July 2014

One of the primary forces driving this transformation, according to Atwan, is the digital expertise demonstrated by the ISIS operatives, who have a commanding presence in social media. A second is that ISIS controls a swath of territory almost as large as Britain, lying between eastern Syria and western Iraq. As Jürgen Todenhöfer, who spent ten days in ISIS-controlled areas in both Iraq and Syria, stated categorically in January: "We have to understand that ISIS is a country now."

In his book, based on visits to the Turkish-Syrian border, online interviews with jihadists, and the access to leaders he enjoys as one of the Arab world's most respected journalists, Atwan draws a convincing picture of the Islamic State as a well-run organization that combines bureaucratic efficiency and military expertise with a sophisticated use of information technology.

For security reasons, and to enhance his mystique, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-styled caliph, keeps a low profile, rarely appearing in public. He is sometime known as the Phantom (*al-shabah*) or "the invisible sheikh" because of his habit of wearing a mask when addressing his commanders." His real name is Ibrahim bin Awwad bin Ibrahim al-Badri al-Qurayshi. He was born in 1971 in the Iraqi town of Samarra, once the seat of the caliphs in the Abbasid period (750–1258), whom he seeks to emulate. Crucially, the Bobadri tribe to which he belongs includes the Prophet Muhammad's tribe of Qurayshin in its lineage. In the classical Sunni tradition, the caliph is required to be a Qurayshite.

According to Baghdadi's online biography, supplied by the IS media agency al-Hayat, he is from a religious fam-

ily that includes several imams (prayer leaders) and Koranic scholars. He is said to have attended the Islamic University of Baghdad where he received his BA, MA, and Ph.D., with his doctorate focusing on Islamic jurisprudence as well as including studies of Islamic culture and history. He first attended the university during Saddam Hussein's "Faith Campaign," when the Iraqi dictator encouraged Islamic religiosity as a way of rousing national feeling against the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq after the US liberated Kuwait from Saddam's occupation in 1991.

While Baghdadi's academic credentials confer legitimacy on his claim to be a religious guide as well as a political and military leader—an authority possessed by neither bin Laden nor Zawahiri—his extensive battlefield experience and reputation as a shrewd tactician have enabled him to gain the support of experienced commanders and administrators from the former Baathist regime. As Atwan writes:

Islamic State always has the advantage of surprise and is able to seize opportunities as and when they arise. Rather than "fight to the death," its brigades will slip away from a battle they are clearly not going to win, regrouping in a more advantageous location...

In January 2015, for example with the US-led alliance bombarding Islamic State targets in Iraq, the Military Council decided to redeploy its efforts to Syria. Fighters inside Iraq were ordered to lie low... while battalions and sleeper cells in Syria were reactivated. As a result, the group doubled the territory under its control in Syria between August 2014 and January 2015.

While skeptics may doubt the sincerity of the ex-Baathists, assuming they are seeking a return to the power they enjoyed before the US invasion, it seems more likely that their support for ISIS has been motivated by religious conviction. With their former hegemony lost, and the previously despised "infidel" Shias in the ascendant in Iraq, these erstwhile secularists are returning to their faith.

This is not to say that the expertise they acquired under Saddam has been lost. As Atwan explains, ISIS is a "highly centralized and disciplined organization" with a sophisticated security apparatus and capacity for delegating power. The caliph—as "successor" of the Prophet—is the ultimate authority; but despite his sermon exhorting believers to "advise me when I err," any threat, opposition, or even contradiction is instantly eradicated. Baghdadi has two deputies—both former members of the Iraqi Baath Party. Both were his fellow prisoners in Camp Bucca, the sprawling American detention center in southern Iraq now seen as the "jihadist university" where former Baathists and Sunni insurgents were able to form ideological and religious bonds. Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, Baghdadi's second-in-command, was a member of Saddam's feared military intelligence. Baghdadi's second deputy, Abu Ali al-Anbari, was a major general in the Iraqi army.

Baghdadi and his deputies set the group's overall objectives, which are then communicated down the hierarchy, with local commanders and administrators allowed to fulfill their tasks at their own discretion in territories under ISIS control. There are advisory councils and several departments run by committees, with leaders of each department sitting in Baghdadi's "cabinet."

The most powerful of these is the Sharia Council, which oversees draconian implementation of the penalties for "crimes against God's limits" (called *hudud*), which include amputations and capital punishment, as well as the punishments for other crimes (called *tazir*), largely aimed at shaming offenders and inducing repentance. The Islamic State has also established a sharia police force (similar to the religious police in Saudi Arabia) tasked with enforcing religious observance. Regular police are brought under ISIS administration, and wear new black uniforms. Police cars are resprayed with the ISIS insignia.

"Sharia courts deal with all complaints, whether religious or civil, and cases can be brought by individuals as well as the police," Atwan writes.



In conurbations where there has been no policing and no judiciary owing to the collapse of central government, these courts are largely popular; citizens can bring cases directly to the courts, which are able to process cases quickly and, in most cases, reasonably.

Justice is said to be impartial, with ISIS soldiers subject to the same punishments as civilians.

An anonymous Sunni Muslim described as “non-extremist” living in Manbij, near Aleppo—under ISIS control since 2014—told Atwan “that crime is now nonexistent” thanks to “the uncompromising methods of the extremists and their ‘consistency.’” The taxes called *zakat* (one of Islam’s five “pillars” of religious obligation) are collected and given to the poor and to the displaced families from other parts of Syria who make up half the city’s population.

Atwan’s informant told him that most of the people living under ISIS rule approve of its educational policies, despite a focus on Islam, with the teaching of science seen as being generally strong. (Atwan claims no other evidence for this view.) More importantly perhaps, teachers are receiving their salaries after months of nonpayment.

The Education Council oversees the provision of education and the curriculum, based on the strict Salafist, or ultra-orthodox, interpretation of the Koran and sharia law. In many cases the curriculum used in Saudi schools—especially at the middle and high school levels—has been adopted in its entirety. Several subjects are banned, including evolutionary biology. Contrary to some media reports, girls are not deprived of education. Indeed ISIS in its online magazines makes a feature of its all-female schools and universities. While gender segregation is rigorously enforced, women are not forbidden by law to drive, as in Saudi Arabia.

The jihadists of ISIS may be terrorists—to use an imprecise, catch-all term—but as Atwan explains, they are both well paid and disciplined, and the atrocities they commit and upload on the Internet are part of a coherent strategy:

Crucifixions, beheadings, the hearts of rape victims cut out and placed upon their chests, mass executions, homosexuals being pushed from high buildings, severed heads impaled on railings or brandished by grinning “jihadist” children—who have latterly taken to shooting prisoners in the head themselves—these gruesome images of brutal violence are carefully packaged and distributed via Islamic State’s media department. As each new atrocity outdoes the last, front-page headlines across the world’s media are guaranteed.

Far from being an undisciplined orgy of sadism, ISIS terror is a systematically applied policy that follows the ideas put forward in jihadist literature, notably in an online tract, *The Management of Savagery*, by the al-Qaeda ideologue Abu Bakr Naji. This treatise, posted in 2004 and widely cited by jihadists, is both a rationale for violence and a blueprint for the Caliphate. It draws heavily on the writings of Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328), the medieval

theologian who inspired the Arabian Wahhabi movement and is highly regarded by Islamists for holding rulers to account in the practice of true religion.

Naji, who was killed in a US drone strike in Waziristan in 2008, considers the violence inherent in conflict a necessary stage in the establishment of the Caliphate. He refers in particular to the campaigns of Muhammad and the “Wars of Apostasy” fought by the first caliph, Abu Bakr, who reigned 632–634 and fought the tribes that had abandoned Islam after the death of Muhammad when they no longer considered themselves bound by their *bayat* (oath of allegiance). Naji sees the coming period of savagery as a time of “vexation and exhaustion” when, as Atwan summarizes, “the superpowers will be worn down militarily by constant threat... from the jihadists.” The Americans, he writes, “have reached a stage of effeminacy which makes them unable to sustain battles for a long period of time.” Naji’s aim here—as Atwan explains—is “to provoke the US to ‘abandon its war against Islam by proxy... and the media psychological war... and to force it to fight directly.’”

While the inspiration for the “savagery” detailed by Naji relies on transplanting the early battles of Islam and projecting them forward in an apocalyptic showdown in northwest Syria, ISIS maximizes the impact of its terror strategy by encouraging scenes of violence and death to be shown on screens and phones.\* Brutality, however, is only one element in the stream of images uploaded by its sophisticated media outlets. The Islamic State, according to Atwan, is also presented as

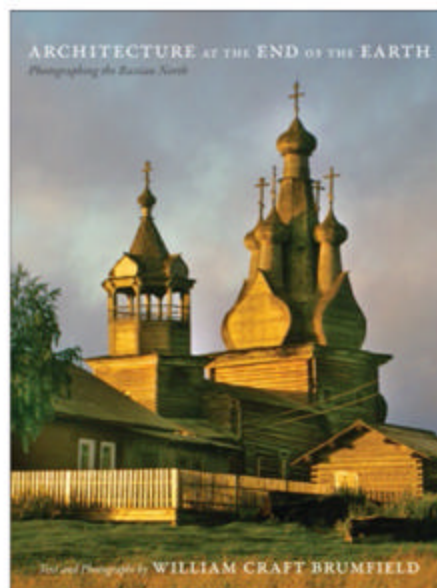
an emotionally attractive place where people “belong,” where everyone is a “brother” or “sister.” A kind of slang, melding adaptations or shortenings of Islamic terms with street language, is evolving among the English-language fraternity on social media platforms in an attempt to create a “jihadi cool.” A jolly home life is portrayed via Instagram images where fighters play with fluffy kittens and jihadist “poster-girls” proudly display the dishes they have created.

The idea of the “restored Caliphate” has been the dream of Islamic revivalists since the formal abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate by Kemal Atatürk in 1924. The appeal, carefully fostered by Baghdadi and his cohorts by means of the Internet and social media, is for a transnational body that stands above the various tribes or communities making up the Muslim world. They are achieving impressive results, with pledges of allegiance (*bayat*) from militants in places as far removed from one another as Nigeria, Pakistan, and Yemen, and in Libya ISIS now has an airbase in Sirte, the hometown of former leader Muammar Qaddafi.

The jihadists’ most potent psychological pitch is exploiting dreams of martyrdom—a theme that is cleverly juxtaposed with images of domestic normalcy. Close-ups of dead fighters’ smiling faces are frequently posted, along with the ISIS “salute”—the right-hand

\*See my “Lure of the Caliphate,” *NYRBlog*, February 28, 2015.

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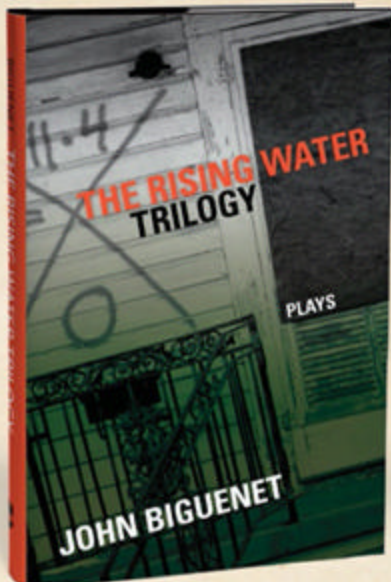
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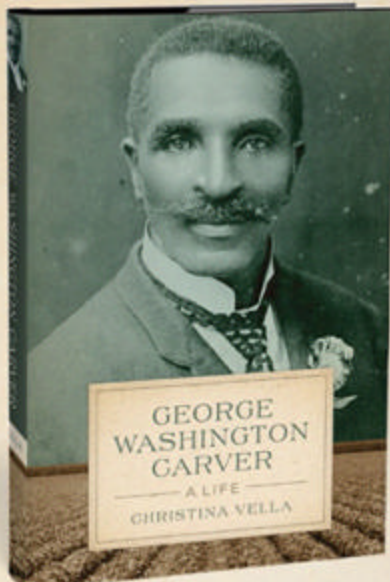
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index finger pointing heavenward. In one Twitter feed a British-born woman shares her "glad tidings":

My husband Rahimuh Allah has done the best transaction you can make his soul [sic] and in return Jenna [heaven] may Allah accept you yaa shaheed [martyr].

"Five hours earlier," Atwan writes, "she had posted a picture of a bowl of cream dessert with bits of Toblerone chocolate stuck on top." For young viewers already used to simulated violence on television and computer games, Naji ups the ante, insisting that in suicide missions jihadists should use "a quantity of explosives that not only destroys the building... [but] makes the earth completely swallow it up. By doing so, the amount of the enemy's fear is multiplied and good media goals are achieved."

The use of explosives for propaganda as well as military purposes can be compared to the "shock and awe" tactics favored by Donald Rumsfeld and Colin Powell in the assault on Baghdad in 2003. The online reputation achieved by these ferocious jihadists inspires such fear that government troops in Iraq and Syria have fled rather than put up a fight. Only Kurds and Shias still have the motivation to offer resistance.

Fear-inducing terror is also personal. Naji writes that hostages whose ransoms have not been paid should be "liquidated in the most terrifying manner which will send fear into the hearts of the enemy and his supporters." American citizens—James Foley and Steven Sotloff—were executed, on camera, in the orange jumpsuits worn by prisoners in Guantánamo Bay. The online theatricals serve to legitimize murder as a type of *qisas*—"retaliation in kind"—which is one of the well-known punishments in Islamic law.

As Atwan points out, these horrifying scenes are expertly disseminated by the ISIS media department, which is run by a French-born Syrian-American trained in Massachusetts. The public information department is led by a Syrian, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami, whom Atwan describes as "the most significant figure in Islamic State after Caliph Ibrahim and his deputies." This Goebbels of the Islamic State has been responsible for some of its most inflammatory propaganda, including an online speech urging "lone-wolf" jihadists living in the West to kill "citizens of countries which have entered into a coalition against Islamic State" by "any means you chose," such as deliberately running over people with vehicles. His speech was followed in quick succession by hit-and-run attacks in Canada, France, and Israel.

Atwan explains how the Islamic State's media department employs an army of journalists, photographers, and editors to produce slick videos with high production values that are disseminated on the Internet without their source being detected. Activists use "virtual private networks" that conceal a user's IP address, in conjunction with browsers—including one originally developed for US Navy intelligence—that enable the viewer to access the "dark Internet," the anonymous zone frequented by child pornographers and other criminals.

In 2014 the US State Department's intelligence unit oversaw the removal of 45,000 jihadist items from the Internet, while Britain's Metropolitan Po-

lice deleted some 1,100 items per week. It seems doubtful, however, that this "electronic counter-jihad" will prove any more successful than efforts to abolish Internet fraud or close down pedophile rings. Like other criminals the "cyber-jihadists" keep one step ahead of the government agencies and service providers seeking to close them down.

Confronting believers with the choice between heaven and hell, salvation and damnation, using fiery rhetoric and imagery, has long been the stock-in-trade of preachers, as famously analyzed by the psychiatrist William Sargant in his classic study of religious conversion and "brain-washing" in *Battle for the Mind* (1957). ISIS can dispense with preachers and instead use social media to stimulate a process of self-radicalization, with thousands of foreign Muslims (and some converts) flocking to join the Caliphate.

Atwan, who visited the area in late 2014, considers the number of fighters for the Islamic State considerably larger than the 100,000 or so usually cited by the Western media, a third of whom—at least 30,000—are foreigners (i.e., non-Iraqis and non-Syrians). The most numerous, according to the Washington Institute, are Libyans (around 21 percent), followed by Tunisians and Saudis (16 percent), Jordanians (11 percent), Egyptians (10 percent), and Lebanese (8 percent). Turkish volunteers, he says, have been underestimated, with some two thousand Turks in ISIS. Europeans are led by the French brigades (composed of French and Belgians of North African descent), with some 6 percent of the total, followed by the British with 4.5 percent. "Australian authorities were shocked to discover" that some two hundred of their nationals had joined ISIS, "making the country the biggest per capita exporter of foreign jihadists."

Conversion and recruitment, however, are far from the only benefits achieved by the Caliphate's mastery of the Internet. Like criminal gangsters, the jihadists use bitcoins and other forms of "cryptocurrency," such as "stored value credit cards" linked to prepaid disposable mobile phones, to avoid detection when accumulating or transferring funds. The group's main source of revenue, however, has been oil. Although ISIS lost two of the Iraqi oil fields it controlled after the Iraqi government's security forces reconquered Tikrit in April, it is still a wealthy organization, having "numerous legal and illegal revenue streams that involve both local and global partners." The budget is managed by an Economic Council that produces annual reports each March. The reports describe in detail attacks and military operations, along with revenue and expenditures. In January 2015 overall receipts were reported to be \$2 billion in all the territories controlled by ISIS, with a surplus of \$250 million added to the war chest.

Ironically ISIS has benefited from the ban on Syrian oil exports imposed by the US and European Union by selling oil directly to the Assad regime—thereby increasing the suspicion that Assad has been an active collaborator with ISIS, in order to eliminate any vestiges of the "moderate" Syrian opposition that retains some Western support. Damage caused by US air strikes to the Syrian oilfields in Deir el-Zor has been compensated by ISIS's conquest of Palmyra (Tadmor), which has two fields of



natural gas and a phosphate mine, the largest in Syria.

Other sources of income include bank robberies, kidnap ransoms, “fees” at roadblocks, and “taxes” imposed on traders living in ISIS-controlled areas. Atwan sees management of these funds as “indicative of a large, well-organized, state-like entity” governed in strict accordance with Islamic law. *Jizya*—the per capita tax paid by Jews and Christians prior to nineteenth-century Ottoman reforms—is now exacted from non-Muslims, while booty and “spoils of war”—including captured women and slaves—may be distributed in accordance with Koranic prescriptions.

Also among such spoils of war are the antiquities taken to buyers from ancient archaeological sites, such as Palmyra. In general, sites are destroyed only after everything of value that can be transported has been removed. In addition to Palmyra—the first site in Syria captured directly from government forces—the looters in Syria have been at work on Hellenistic and Byzantine remains in Apamea, Dura-Europos, and the ISIS-controlled city of Raqqa.

As well as describing the internal structure of the Islamic State and its uses of the Internet, Atwan provides an authoritative account of its beginnings in the branch of al-Qaeda in Iraq dominated by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who—contrary to bin Laden’s more inclusive approach—adopted violently sectarian rhetoric and organized atrocities

ties at Shia mosques and places of pilgrimage in line with his ultra-Wahhabist theology. Atwan thinks that Zarqawi’s overall strategy was to fight the US occupation by dragging the ruling Shias into a civil war with Sunnis. This would allow his group to increase its influence among the indigenous Sunni population and bring in Sunni fighters from neighboring countries (Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia) where Sunnis are the majority. Given the current state of Iraq and Syria, the strategy seems to have paid off handsomely.

In June 2006 Zarqawi was tracked down and killed by a fighter jet after posting Rambo-style pictures of himself on the Internet, enabling US surveillance to pinpoint his location. The lesson was not lost on his successors, who joined with other Sunni groups to form the umbrella Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the nucleus of ISIS. By a Darwinian process, jihadists who failed to master complex systems of cybersecurity were rapidly eliminated, leaving the field to their more sophisticated and technically proficient brethren.

Atwan notes that none of Zarqawi’s successors, including Baghdadi, pledged allegiance (*bayat*) to bin Laden or his successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Technically ISI and its heirs (now ISIS or Islamic State) have been independent of al-Qaeda for the past eight years, a factor that helps to facilitate defections from members of other Islamist groups, such as the Syrian-based Jabhat al-Nusra, which retains its formal links with al-Qaeda. Jabhat al-

Nusra, supported by Qatar and other Gulf states, now spearheads internal opposition to the Assad regime. Rather than threatening Damascus politically, ISIS has focused on building its state.

The obvious question that arises is, where will all of this end? A meeting in Paris in early June of twenty-four coalition partners led by the US and France failed to come up with any new strategies. With ISIS in control of Ramadi, the capital of Anbar Province, and nearing the outskirts of Aleppo in Syria, coalition air strikes are plainly insufficient to deter the Caliphate’s expansion. Only the Kurdish Peshmerga and Iranian-trained Shiite militias have the capacity and will to halt the Caliphate’s amoeba-like growth in Iraq. But the deployment of Shia militias can only escalate an already dangerous sectarian conflict.

Shia mosques are being targeted by ISIS not only in Iraq, where Shias are in the majority, but also in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, where most of the oil is located. Efforts by the Saudi regime to defend its Shia minority (who already suffer discrimination) must surely play into the hands of the ISIS militants, who like their stricter Wahhabi counterparts regard the Shias as heretics. As Atwan explains, both the House of Saud and the Islamic State lay claim to the “true path” of Islam as outlined by the eighteenth-century scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, yet each considers the other to be in a state of apostasy.

There seems little doubt about which of these claims is perceived in Saudi

Arabia as more authentic. In an online poll conducted in July 2014, a formidable 92 percent of Saudi citizens agreed that ISIS “conforms to the values of Islam and Islamic law.” In mounting its challenge to the Saudi monarch’s quasi-caliphal claim to lead the Muslim world as “Guardian of the Two Holy Shrines” (Mecca and Medina), ISIS highlights “the royal family’s love of luxury and acceptance of corruption which, it claims, renders its members ideologically and morally unfit for the task.”

The values and hubris of the Saudi dynasty are exemplified by its astounding exploitation, not to say desecration, of Mecca’s holy city, where the world’s largest hotel (seventy restaurants and 10,000 bedrooms) is under construction in the dynasty’s favorite wedding-cake style—with five of its forty-five stories reserved for exclusive use by the royal family. As oil prices decline the princes and their friends expect to benefit by “catering to the increasingly high expectations of well-heeled pilgrims from the Gulf.” By appropriating Wahhabism’s iconoclastic rhetoric, along with its anti-Shia theology, ISIS challenges the legitimacy of the Saudi rulers as guardians of Islam’s holy places far more effectively than any republican movement. With Iraq and Syria falling apart and the US caught between conflicting impulses (fighting alongside Iran in Iraq while opposing it in Syria), it may only be a matter of time before the nightmare imagined by James Buchan becomes a reality. □

—June 9, 2015

## LETTERS

### SHOULD WE CONVENE?

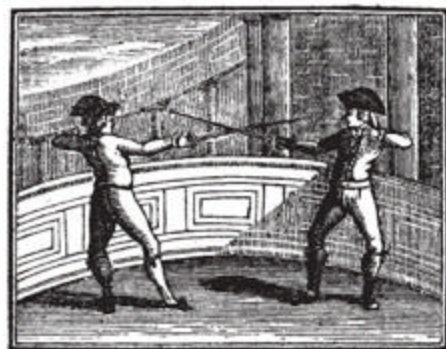
To the Editors:

Elizabeth Drew charges (referring to me) [NYR, June 4] that, “At first he called for a Constitutional Convention, which would be a disaster since it could lead to all sorts of other proposals.” This criticism makes a common mistake, caused by an imprecision in the term “constitutional convention.”

By “a convention,” as Gordon Wood describes, our framing generation meant “all sorts of meetings for quasi-public purposes.” But the nature of any particular convention turned on its purpose. Not every “convention” had the power to “alter or abolish” (as the Declaration of Independence put it) an existing constitution.

Some conventions could. Those are “constitutional conventions” in the jurisprudential sense. The “convention of 1787,” which crafted our own Constitution, was a “constitutional convention” in this sense. It was not convened pursuant to any clause in the Articles of Confederation, and indeed, was not even conceived by Congress. Those participating were engaging the constituent power of the nation; they had the “unalienable right” to “alter or abolish” the then existing Constitution. And indeed, they did alter that Constitution, by changing the rules by which modifications to that constitution would be ratified.

The “convention” spoken of in Article V is very different. First, the Constitution does not refer to it as a “constitutional convention.” Instead, it speaks of “a convention to propose amendments.” But the same clause makes explicit that those amendments are invalid unless “ratified by” three fourths of the states. The purpose of this convention is thus simply to make proposals.



Obviously, there is no “disaster,” as Drew puts it, if all the convention can do is make “proposals.” Three fourths is thirty-eight states; the vote of a single house in thirteen states (representing as little as 5 percent of the nation’s population) could block any amendment. That is as strong a check against “disaster” as any in our Constitution.

Likewise, obviously, it would be a “disaster” if such a body, on its own, could modify the Constitution, or even (as the framing convention did) the rules for amending the Constitution. But if the English language has meaning, that is not what a “convention” pursuant to Article V can do. Its only power is the power “to propose.”

We should all perhaps adopt this convention to avoid the confusion about the meaning of the Constitution’s “convention” clause: what the Constitution establishes is the power of the states to force Congress to convene “a Proposing Convention.” The Constitution does not give anyone the power to convene “a Constitutional Convention.”

**Lawrence Lessig**  
Roy L. Furman Professor  
of Law and Leadership  
Harvard Law School  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Elizabeth Drew replies:

It never crossed my mind that Mr. Lessig was proposing a convention that would be free to amend the Constitution wherever it wanted. In the context in which I wrote what I did, it was clear that the convention Mr. Lessig was championing would be about amendments to the Constitution, which I consider no less dangerous.

I learned in seventh grade that amendments to the Constitution have to be ratified by the states. The obvious danger is that a certain mood would sweep the country to amend the Constitution by, say, banning all abortions, lowering the wall between church and state, or taking the ambiguity out of the Second Amendment so as to make it clear that guns could be purchased without exception. Therefore it would be foolhardy in not just my opinion but that of others who are also serious about campaign finance reform, to encourage, enable, set a precedent for mitigating the protections now provided by the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

This also applies to proposals to open up the First Amendment to deal with *Citizens United*; as my article points out, there are other ways to get at that—as well as other shortcomings such as impingements on the right to vote—without risking the freedoms and protections that we now enjoy.

### WHAT ASTRO IMAGES DO

To the Editors:

I was of course pleased to see my last book reviewed [“Revelations from Outer Space,” NYR, May 21], and gratified at the generally favorable assessment of *Cosmographics* by astrophysicist Priyamvada Natarajan.

There are nevertheless a few elements of Dr. Natarajan’s piece that require com-

ment. She writes that the book renders the history of cosmology in such a way that it seems to have “evolved seamlessly and without intellectual conflicts and ruptures.” In support of this she states flatly: “The trial of Galileo over his interpretation of the solar system isn’t mentioned.” But his trial under threat of torture, and his 1633 recantation of heliocentrism, is indeed addressed in some detail in Chapter 5, among other places. So for that matter is Giordano Bruno’s conviction, and burning at the stake in 1600; Copernicus’s reluctance to publish his findings until the last months of his life, due to fear of ridicule or worse; and numerous other examples of contention, schism, and dispute throughout the history of cosmological thought, reaching back as far as Aristarchus’s finding that the sun is at the center of the solar system, an idea overruled in favor of Aristotle’s geocentric design.

But my major demurral concerns Dr. Natarajan’s evaluation of my assertion that scientific discoveries are made within images. She labels this idea “Benson’s fantasy.” In fact, *Cosmographics* documents several examples of such discoveries. These include oceanographer Marie Tharp’s midcentury assembly of pointillistic sonar data in pictorial form, leading to her discovery of a chain of rift valleys running down the center of the mid-Atlantic ridge—substantial empirical proof of the plate tectonics theory. And cosmologist Richard Gott’s discovery of a wall of galaxies 1.38 billion light years long—1/60th the diameter of the visible universe—as he and researcher Mario Jurić used conformal projection techniques to plot thousands of galaxies from the Sloan Digital Sky Survey. Gott and Jurić became aware of the Sloan Great Wall while creating their astonishing logarithmic map of the cosmos over a decade ago. As with Tharp, cartographic convention was decisively and thrillingly



upended as mapmaking led to discovery, rather than the other way around.

More recently, astronomer R. Brent Tully, a leading researcher into the astrophysics of galaxy clusters, perceived the full extent of a dynamic flow of some 30,000 galaxies, including our own—a motion due to an enormous gravitational well comparable to a terrestrial watershed. He did so while studying a graphic supercomputer simulation of a cube of space some 500 million light years across. As Tully confirmed to me months before his “Laniakea Supercluster” was unveiled in *Nature* last year, he and his collaborators’ discovery was only possible because of that visualization. Here as elsewhere, graphical representation came before discovery, permitting the discernment of structure, and thus meaning.

Throughout history, images have been critically important tools in our ongoing attempts to understand the cosmos. No less than words and mathematical equations, graphic representations bear knowledge, convey theories, and yes, lead directly to scientific discoveries.

If this is fantasy, let’s have more of it.

**Michael Benson**

Visiting Scholar  
Center for Bits and Atoms, MIT Media Lab  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

**Priyamvada Natarajan** replies:

Michael Benson’s comment raises an important question about what astronomical images do and what they are for. While we both agree that images are tools, where we differ is on what kind of tool they are and what part they play in the scientific process. Benson conceives of astronomical images as constitutive of scientific discovery. To extend this claim to all of science, as Benson does, makes what is an occasional rarity the rule. Graphical representation most often does not come before discovery but rather, after it. Visualization of previously acquired complex data of course might lead to further insights and discoveries, but images do not create meaning independently of scientific frameworks or models.

Take, for example, my work in astrophysics using what is seen—galaxy light—to map the unseen—dark matter. My research relies on images taken by the Hubble Space Telescope that record the systematic distorted shapes of galaxies produced by light bending due to the presence of dark matter. These images serve first and foremost as data, data that only become scientifically significant when interpreted through Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity. Einstein’s General Relativity, it is worth noting, was not inspired by these or any other images, it was derived from equations using the language of mathematics.

Images help scientists conceptualize our ideas and in particular, they play an important part for nascent ideas that require much more fleshing out in science. Visualizing data, especially utilizing computer tools to see three-dimensional renditions, does refine scientists’ understanding. Images, however, are more often than not important and critical post-facto representations of our current best-to-date understanding.

For instance, my colleague Brent Tully’s realization of the shape of the supercluster Laniakea did not arise from just the rendition on his computer. He has painstakingly gathered detailed astronomical data on the positions and speeds of galaxies in this entire region of the sky over decades. He knew of the existence of an excess of galaxies from his observational data before his image and computer visualization came into the picture. It was when he plotted his data and used a three-dimensional rendering that the shape, orientation, and scale of the supercluster emerged. Without the astronomical data that he had gathered prior, there would be no basis to explore and have figured out the existence of this incredible superstructure in our cosmic backyard.

Thus visualization is only part of the scientific process that includes other impor-

tant prior steps. Images are not in general generative *ab initio* of ideas; they are often a consequence and do provide new conceptions. There are instances when they play a more pivotal part, such as the one I discussed featuring Kip Thorne and *Interstellar*: the equations that describe the bending of light around black holes and wormholes are well known. It is only after these known complex equations were rendered for the movie that Thorne noticed new additional effects that he and others had been unable to visualize earlier.

## IT WASN’T LYUBYANKA

*To the Editors:*

An essay by Ian Frazier on Daniil Kharmis [NYR, May 7] states that Kharmis and his second wife, Marina Durnovo, were brought by NKVD agents to “the ‘Big House’—the Lyubyanka Prison.” This is a mistake. Kharmis and Durnovo lived in Leningrad, and they were arrested there at the end of August 1941. The NKVD building in Leningrad is commonly known as the “Big House.” Its is located at Liteynyi Prospekt.

The Lyubyanka building and the so-called Lyubyanka inner prison (closed in the 1960s) is located in Moscow on Big Lyubyanka Street—currently the FSB headquarters. Obviously, the author of the essay has confused the two “scary” KGB buildings—one in Leningrad, the other in Moscow—and combined them into a “Big House” (Leningrad’s) with the Lyubyanka prison (in Moscow).

Kharmis was jailed, as the author has mentioned correctly, at Leningrad’s Kresty prison (Crosses), where he died, according to some sources, in the psychiatric ward, in February of 1942.

**Vladimir Strizhevsky**  
Woodhaven, New York

## BERRYMAN’S ‘BONES’

*To the Editors:*

Concerning my “Berryman: Tragedy & Comedy Together” [NYR, June 4], I am grateful to the poet William Logan for informing me that “bones” in John Berryman’s “Mr. Bones” does not refer to dice. He writes:

A small correction: the end men in the minstrel show, called Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones, played the tambourine and bone castanets, respectively. The bones aren’t dice in this instance.... I believe Tambo and Bones were sit-down comics rather than stand-up, though we don’t know as much as we’d like about the actual performances.

**Helen Vendler**  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

## CORRECTION

In Annie Sparrow’s letter about the use of gas in World War I [Letters, NYR, June 4], the 160 tons of chlorine gas used by the Germans against the Allies were delivered by canisters from the German trenches, not by German planes.

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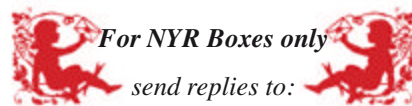
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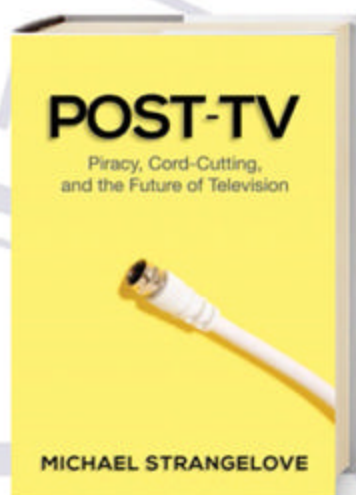
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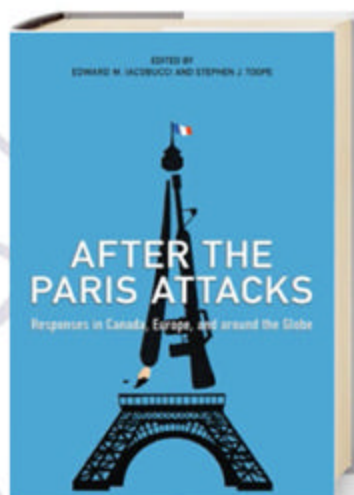


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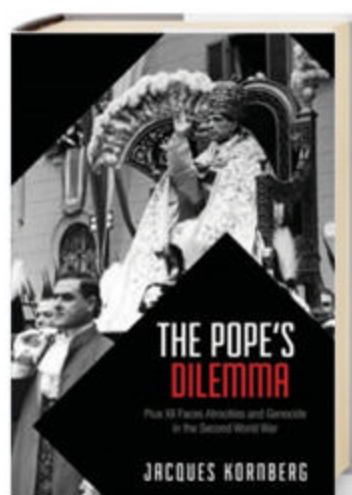


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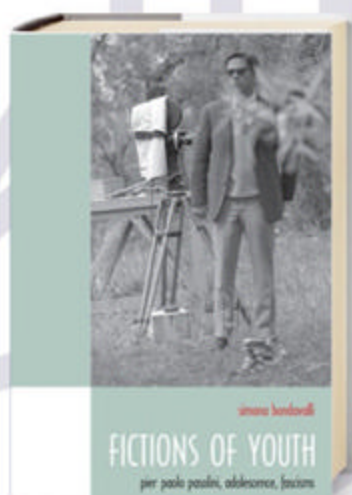
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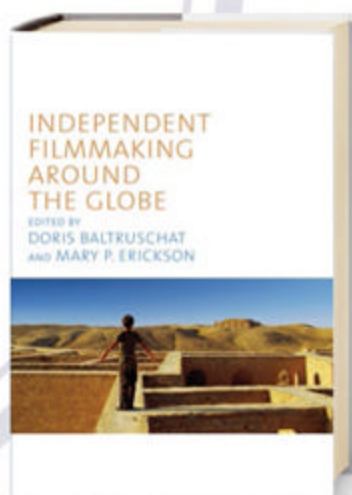
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